川原礫
ソードアート・オンライン
SWORD ART ONLINE 02

SWORD ART ONLINE
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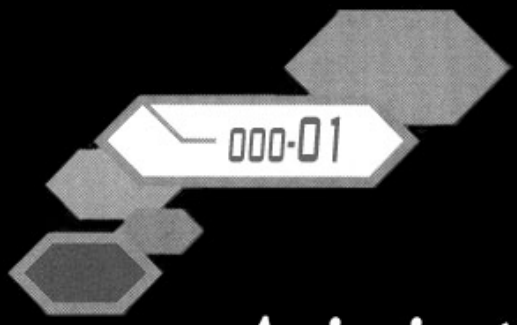
イラスト／abec
ソードアート・オンライン
プログレッシブ
星なき夜のアリア アインクラッド第一層 2022年12月
≪黒の剣士≫と≪閃光≫のレイピア使い。
後にそう呼ばれ畏怖される名剣士二人の、出会いの物語。

「なあ、あんた……
シルバー・クロウ」
キリト
どこからともなく
学内ローカルネットに出現した、
謎の剣士タイプアバター
「誰なんだ……!?
いったい、どうやって梅郷中の
ローカルネットに接続した!?」



Aria in the Starless Night

Aincrad 1st Floor
December 2022

Part 1

Just once, I saw a real shooting star.

It was not during a vacation; it was from the window of my house. For people living in towns with crisp air and actual dark nights, shooting stars are not uncommon. But unfortunately, Kawagoe City of Saitama prefecture, where I have lived all fourteen years of my life, has neither of those qualities. On a clear night, even a second magnitude star can barely be seen with the naked eye.

But, late one midwinter night, when I happened to glance outside my window on a whim, I saw it. On that deep night without many stars, the city lights formed a whitish canopy covering the sky. And in an instant, it was cut by a quick flash of light. My soon-to-be 5th grade self childishly thought, "I must make some kind of wish...". Up to that point was fine, but the wish which appeared in my mind was, "I wish my next monster drop is going to be a rare item." It was the kind of wish no sensible person would make. I suppose it sprang from the fact I was playing an MMORPG I liked at the time. The shooting star I glimpsed that day, I saw it once again three (or was it four) years later—glowing the same color, moving at the same speed.

However, this time, I did not see it with the naked eye, nor was I beneath the dark grey night sky.

I saw it through a Nerve Gear, the world's first full sensory type VR interface, at the bottom of a gloomy, virtual dungeon.

* * *

One could describe the fight as bloodcurdling.

The level 6 humanoid monster, «Ruin Kobold Trooper», was swinging an uncouth hand ax, and the person fighting the Kobold was barely able to dodge. I felt a chill run down my back as I watched the battle. But after the player dodged three consecutive strikes, the Kobold completely lost its balance and, instead of using this chance to escape, the person used a sword attack skill at full strength.

The skill was the first rapier skill players learn: the single thrust attack «Linear». This sword skill is activated by holding a sword in front of the body with the main hand, concentrating on it, and then thrusting the sword straight forward; it was a simple, basic skill, but the speed was terrific. Clearly, the speed was not left to the system motion assist alone, but was boosted by the player's own movement commands.

During the beta test, I saw with my own eyes many party members and enemy monsters using this same sword skill many times, but I could not see the rapier itself now, only the trajectory drawn by the sword skill's special light effect. That pure white flash cutting through the darkness of the low light dungeon reminded me of the shooting star of that day.

The rapier user continued dodging the Kobold's three strike combo and then counterattacking with «Linear». After using this attack and defense pattern three more times, the player finished off one of this dungeon's stronger monsters, an armed beastman, without being wounded. Even then, it did not seem to have been an easy battle. After the killing sword skill passed through the center of its chest, the monster collapsed backwards and dispersed into particles. The

rapier user wavered as if being pushed by the unsubstantial polygon shards, and leaned back onto the corridor wall, slowly slid down against the wall to sit, and started breathing hard.

The person did not seem to notice me standing about 15 meters away at the corner of an intersection.

Moving far away without saying anything and finding my own prey, was my normal way of doing things. One month ago, on that eventful day, I decided to selfishly live as a solo player. And after that day, I never approached anyone alone. The only exception was if I saw a player in battle who was clearly in danger, however the rapier user's HP gauge was still near full. At the very least, the person did not seem to need the help of some busybody.

Even so...

After about five seconds of deliberation, I left the shadow of the intersection and walked toward the still sitting rapier user. Skinny shape, somewhat slender. The torso was equipped with a dark red leather tunic with a lightweight copper breastplate, while the lower body was dressed in neat leather pants, with boots up to the knees. A hooded cape cloaked the body from head to near-waist, so the face could not be seen. Other than the cape, the equipment seemed to be that of a fencer, very similar to my equipment as a swordsman. My beloved sword «Anneal Blade», a reward from a difficult quest, is very heavy. So, to utilize the sharpness of my skills, I wear very little metal armor—only a small chest guard with a dark-grey leather coat over it.

Hearing my approaching footsteps, the rapier user's shoulder suddenly shook, but did not move beyond that. That I was not a

monster should be shown as a green colored cursor in that person's view. With his face buried deep behind raised knees, showing a 'just pass by like that and go somewhere else' feeling very strongly—I stopped about two meters from the rapier user and opened my mouth.

"...That was an extreme overkill."

The small shoulder covered by the thick cloth of the cape moved slightly again. The hood jerked, moved up just about 5cm, from the darkness inside, two pupils sharply shot at me. The only thing I could determine was the light brown iris, the shape of the face could not be seen at all.

The rapier user continued to look with that sharp sight used in the earlier battle for a few seconds, then tilted the head slightly to the right—an 'I don't understand what you mean' kind of gesture.

Seeing that, I thought 'so it was like that'.

For what looked like solo play to me, one thing was a huge incongruity.

The «Linear» released by the rapier user was so perfect that I couldn't help but shiver. The pre-motion and post-motion was short, and above all was the speed that did not allow it to be seen. I have never seen such a fearsome and beautiful sword skill before.

So at the start, I was thinking that he must be a similar beta tester. Before this world became a death game; long battle experience must have been gained for this speed.

However, seeing «Linear» a second time, I had doubts about my guess. The skill was perfect, but the battle pace was dangerous. For

sure, «Step Defense which uses the smallest movement» has a higher counter attack speed over parry or block, and weapon/armor durability will not decrease. In exchange, when the defense fails, the risk is greatest. At worst, counter damage is applied and a stun could occur. In solo battles, a stun is fatal.

The perfect sword skill and the dangerous defense tactics were unbalanced. For some reason, I wanted to know why, no matter what. That's why I moved closer and inquired. Asking if the repeated use of the tactic was overkill.

However the opponent did not seem to understand the extremely popular net game phrase. That means the rapier user in front of me was not an original beta tester. Not only that, they might not even have been an MMO player before coming here.

I took a short breath, and explained anew.

"Overkill means... compared to the monster's remaining HP, the damage done was way too much. The Kobold earlier was almost dead after the second «Linear» ... no, it was practically dead already. Its HP gauge had only two or three dots remaining. Instead of finishing it with a sword skill, a light normal attack would have been more than enough."

In this world, how many days had it been since I talked so much... how many weeks. While thinking that, I stopped talking.

After listening to my speech, the fruit of my hard work and my poor speaking skills, the rapier user had no reaction for over ten seconds. Just when I thought I did not manage to get through, a small voice finally slipped through the lowered hood.

"...Overkill, is there any problem with it?"

At that moment, I belatedly realized this rapier user huddled in front of me, deep in this dungeon, was one of this world's extraordinarily rare «Female Players».

Part 2

It was already one month since the official launch of the world's first VRMMORPG «Sword Art Online».

For the average MMO, by this time players reaching the level cap should be about to appear and the world map should have been explored from end to end. However for SAO, the current top class group is barely level 10—I didn't know if this was the cap, but there was no way it could be. The game's stage, the floating castle Aincrad, had only been conquered by a few percent in total.

The reason was, the current SAO was a game but not a game; in a sense, it had become a «Jail». Manual logout was not possible and avatar death was the same as real player death. In these conditions, not many people entered dungeons filled with dangerous monsters and traps.

Also, after the Gamemaster forcefully made the avatars the same gender as the players in this world, females were very rare. I think almost all of them were still staying in the «Starting City», even after one month. In the first huge dungeon, «First Floor Maze», I have seen female players only two or three times, and they were all members of big parties.

That's why I never would have imagined the solo rapier user I met in an unexplored area of the dungeon would be a female player.

* * *

For a moment, I thought about mumbling an apology and leaving the area. I would not say I was a guy who always talked to any female player he saw; I sincerely would not like to be thought of like that.

On the other hand, if the opponent had said something like, 'It's my choice' or 'Leave me alone,' I would have said 'I see' and left immediately. However, the rapier user's short reply was a question. So, I again gingerly and earnestly answered.

"...Overkill has no demerit or penalty from the system, but... it's bad for efficiency. Sword skills require concentration; using them continuously is mentally exhausting. There's also the return path, so it's better to not fight in a way that makes you tired."

"...Return path?"

Again, from deep inside the hood a questioning sound was voiced. The fatigue made it very faint and the intonation was also thin, but even so I thought her voice was beautiful. Of course, I would not say that out loud.

So, I explained once more.

"Yes. It takes about an hour to get from here to the dungeon exit, and from there to the closest town is about 30 minutes even when moving quickly. Exhaustion will increase mistakes. You look like a soloer, and for one person, any small mistake could cost your life."

While my mouth moved, I asked myself, 'Why am I speaking with all my might?' The opponent is female—but that couldn't be the reason, since I had given a long speech before knowing that.

If the situation was reversed, and a upper rank person lectured me like this, I would have said, 'It's my choice, so leave me alone,' or something like that. With my personality and actions not matching, I was about to sweat when the rapier user finally replied.

"...Then, there's no problem. I am... not returning."

"What? ...Not returning to town? But... replenishing potions, fixing equipment... and sleep..."

After I asked dumbfounded, the rapier user's shoulders shook slightly.

"I don't need medicine when I am not taking damage, and I bought five of the same sword. ...As for resting, I use the nearby safe area."

As the murmur faded, I was speechless for a while.

Safe areas were a few rooms in a dungeon where monsters do not appear. You can recognize one by a special colored torch placed in the four corners on the wall. For hunting and mapping, it's a nice place; but even so it could only be used for about one hour of short rest. The floor was made of cold stone and there was of course no bed, and nearby monster footsteps or growl could be heard frequently. No matter how courageous a player was, deep sleep was absolutely impossible.

But, from what I just heard, this rapier user had been using safe area in lieu of a town inn, in order to remain in the dungeon... is that, what does it mean?

"...How many hours has it been?"

I fearfully inquired.

The rapier user answered after a long breath.

"Three days... or four days... Is that all? The monsters around here will revive soon. I will be going."

With her delicate left hand in a thick leather glove pushing on the wall, she unsteadily stood up.

The slender sword which was still out dipped down heavily like she was holding a two-handed sword one-handed, and the rapier user walked away behind me.

The cape which moved away shuffling was in tatters, showing that a lot of its durability had been lost. No, for cloth equipment which was used for a four-day hunting expedition, just having maintained its shape was a miracle. The earlier 'As long as I don't take damage' comment might not have been an exaggeration...

After realizing that, I spit out some unthinkable words to her slender back.

"...If you fight like that, you will die."

The rapier user stopped, leaned her shoulder on the right wall and turned around slowly. From deep within the hood, her hazel-looking eyes shot at me with a thin red background.

"...Everyone will die in the end anyway."

The hoarse, cracked sound made the cool dungeon air colder.

"In just one month, 2000 people died. But still, not even the first floor has been been cleared. It is not possible to clear this game. Where and how you die, early... or late, is the only difference..."

The longest, most emotional speech until now fluctuated in the middle and cut off.

In front of me who stepped forward on reaction, the rapier user was hit by an unseen paralyzing attack and slowly sank to the floor.

Part 3

As she was falling to the dungeon floor, she felt a prosaic thought drift by. 'How is it possible to faint in a virtual space?'

Loss of consciousness means the brain's normal blood flow is momentarily stopped. The reason for this could be a malfunction in the heart or blood vessels, anemia or low blood pressure, hyperventilation or many other reasons; but while in a VR world in FullDive, the physical body is resting on a bed or reclining chair. The physical body of the players imprisoned by this death game «SAO» would probably be currently placed in a hospital; their health would obviously be checked and they would be continuously monitored. If necessary, medicine would be used. It's hard to believe loss of consciousness is due to the physical body.

This is what she thought up to that point as her consciousness faded, and at the end she thought, 'Whatever happens is fine with me.'

Yes, whatever happens now is fine by me.

Because, she will die here. Fainting in a maze full of violent monsters, there is no way she would be unharmed. There was another player nearby, but she did not think he would endanger his life to help another who had fallen.

Anyway, how could he help? In this world, the maximum weight a single player can carry is strictly limited by the system. In the depths of dungeon, everyone carries medicine and extra equipment to their weight limit, leaving space for monster drops such as gold and items. With all those combined, the act of carrying a whole person is absolutely not possible.

—After thinking up to that point, she finally realized something.

She was hit by a strong sense of vertigo, and what she thought of as she fell to the ground was, 'Finally, I can relax for a long time'. What's under her body should have been the hard stone floor of the dungeon. But, somehow the feeling against her back was strangely fluffy and soft. Her body felt warm, and a light breeze caressed her cheek...

She opened her eyes fast enough to make a sound.

She was no longer in a maze lined by thick walls. There were old trees with golden moss and thorny brushes with small flowers, a clearing in a forest. At the center of a round space of about 7 or 8 meters, there on a soft carpet of grass, she lost consciousness... no, was sleeping.

But—why? How was she, who had fallen in the depths of the dungeon, moved to a far away field?

The answer to that question was found when she turned her view 90 degrees to the right.

At the edge of the clearing, sticking to the root of a majestic tree, was a grey shadow. A somewhat large one hand sword was held in both arms, and its sheath laid under his head. Long black hair covered his face so it could not be seen, but from his equipment and physique, there was no mistake he was the male player who talked to her before she fainted in the dungeon.

Maybe that man used some sort of method to move her out from the maze to this forest after she had fallen. She looked past the forest. On the left side, about 100 meters away, a huge tower reaching up to the sky—the first floor maze of Aincrad stood there menacingly.

She returned her view to her right again. Noticing movement, the man's dark-grey leather coat covered shoulders shook and he lifted his head slightly. Even in the bright midday forest, the man's two eyes were black like a starless night.

The moment her eyes met his dark-colored eyes, she felt small fireworks blasting in her head.

While grinding her teeth, Asuna—Yuuki Asuna, forced out a low, hoarse voice.

"Unnecessary... effort."

* * *

After being imprisoned in this world, Asuna asked herself hundreds and thousands of times.

At that time, why did she touch a new game machine that was not even hers? Why did she put it on her head, lay on the high back mesh chair, and say the start command?

The dream VR interface that was the cursed killing machine «Nerve Gear», and its huge jail of the soul, the «Sword Art Online» game disc was not bought by Asuna, but by her older brother Koichiro. However for her brother, playing MMORPGs was not something he would normally do. His life was centered around other things and he hadn't played any 'games' since his youth. Born as the first son to the acting president of the huge electronic machine maker «Recto», as his father's successor he received a lot of training in necessary things and was forced to cut out all the unnecessary things while growing up. Why her brother would be interested in Nerve Gear... no, be interested in SAO, was something that even now she did not understand.

However, ironically, Koichiro would not be able to play the first game he bought in his life. On the first day of the game's official service, he was sent on a business trip overseas. On the day before his departure, at the dining table when their faces met, he complained about it jokingly, but she felt that he really had regrets.

Not as extreme as Koichiro, for Asuna who was a 3rd year middle school student, the only experience of a game she played was free games on her cell phone once in a while. She knew about the existence of net games, but with high school entrance exams closing, there was no interest or motivation to play these games—or there was supposed to be none.

So, why on that day one month ago, November 6, 2022, did she visit her brother's empty room, took the fully setup Nerve Gear from the top of his desk and put it on her head, and said «Link Start»?, she still did not understand the reason she did those things till this day.

Just from one thing she said, everything changed on that day... no, it ended could be said to.

In the beginning Asuna locked herself in an inn room in the Starting City to wait for the incident to end, but after two weeks with no message from the real world, she gave up hope on being saved from outside. Also at the same time, over one thousand players had died, and she found out that even the first maze had not been broken through, she realized that waiting inside for game clear is useless.

The only remaining choice, was «What kind of death» only.

Just staying in the only safe city for months, no, years like this could be a way. However, no one can be sure that the rule of «Monsters cannot enter cities» will continue forever.

Instead of huddling in a small dark room fearing for the future, it's better to go outside. Use all her ability to learn, train, and fight. If she ended up dying after using all her strength, at least she would be without trouble for the past and regrets of a lost future.

Run. Charge forward. Then disappear. like a meteor burning up upon entering the atmosphere.

Holding onto that one thought, Asuna left the inn, and stepped out into the wilderness of the MMORPG world that she doesn't know a single common phrase of. She chose her own weapon, and relied on just one skill she learned, reaching the bottom of the maze that no one had been to before.

Then today, Friday, December 2, at four in the morning. Probably due to continuous reckless battle exhaustion, she fainted due to neural reflex, and her path should have ended. In Starting City's «Black Iron Palace», the «Life Monument» close to the left side, the

name ‘Asuna’ should be carved there smoothly in a horizontal line, and everything would have ended—supposed to. And yet.

* * *

“Unnecessary...”

Asuna again squeezed out that word, about four meters away the dark hair, single-handed sword user lowered his night color eyes. The impression of his age seem to be a little higher than hers, but that naive gesture made her involuntarily wrinkle her brow.

However a few seconds later, the man’s mouth showed a cynical smile that overwrote her previous impression.

“I did not save you.”

A low quiet sound. That sounded like a youth, but something in it camouflaged his age this time too.

“...Then, why did you not leave me there.”

“What I saved, was the map data you had. Staying for four days in the front line, meant you should have mapped a lot of the unexplored dungeon. It’s a bit too important to disappear along with you.”

With logic and efficiency pushed onto her, she took a deep breath. Up to now, how important life is, and how everyone should join force to work together, when people told her those in the city she just pushed them away—of course with words only—she thought of doing it, but could not think of any reasonable response.

“...Then, just take it.”

With the low mutter, she opened a window. Navigating the recently, finally familiar tabs, she accessed her map data and copied them all to sheep skin paper item. She made the scroll into an object and tossed it near the man's feet.

"With this, your objective is achieved right. Then, I will be going."

Pushing on the grass with her hand, she stood up but wobbled slightly. From the time display in the window, she calculated that she had slept for seven hours since she fell, but her exhaustion had not fully recovered. However, she still had three prepared rapiers left. She decided earlier on that she would not leave the tower until the last rapier only had half durability.

She had many unexplained questions. The grey coated single hand sword user, what kind of method did he use to move her from the depth of the maze to the forest clearing? Even if moved, why not to a safe area in the maze, instead of the difficulty of moving her to the outside of dungeon?

Even so, she did not think it was something she needed to turn around and ask. To return to the dark raised maze, she took a step to the left of the forest—but, before that.

"Wait, Fencer-san."

"..."

She ignored it and took a few steps forward, but the speech after made her involuntarily stop.

"You too, are basically working hard to clear the game right? Not just to die in the maze. Then, wouldn't it be better if you show your face at the «Meeting»?"

"...Meeting?"

After muttering that with her back still turned, she heard the swordsman's changed tone carry on the light forest breeze.

"Today in the afternoon, at the town «Tolbana» that is closest to the maze, the first «First floor boss strategy conference» is supposed to be held."

Part 4

Since the floating castle Aincrad was made with a lot of detail, of course the first floor was the widest. The first floor was almost completely circular, with a diameter of 10 kilometers—that is, an area of about 80 square kilometers. For reference, Kawagoe City, Saitama prefecture has an area of 110 square kilometers, and a population of over 300,000 people.

For its huge size, the first floor actually held a lot of geographic variety.

On the southern edge, with a diameter of one kilometer surrounded by half circle of walls, was the «Starting City». In the grasslands surrounding the city, mainly boar- and wolf-type animals as well as worm-, beetle-, and wasp-type insect monsters inhabited the area.

Northwest of the grassland was a deep wide forest, and northeast was the lake region. After passing through either of the two there were mountains, valleys, and ruins that contain monsters lying in wait for players to pass by, and on the far northern edge of the floor,

was a 300-meter wide, 100-meter tall squat tower. Here, stood the first floor maze.

In many places on the first floor other than the Starting City, many small- and medium-sized towns and villages existed. The largest of them—even then, it's only about 200 meters from edge to edge—was the town situated in the valley closest to the maze: «Tolbana».

The first time players arrived at this town lined with huge windmills was three weeks after the official service of SAO began.

At that point, the total number of deaths actually reached 1800.

* * *

The mysterious female fencer and I set out; while maintaining a certain distance between ourselves, we left the forest and arrived at Tolbana's north gate.

Purple letters [INNER AREA] flowed into my view, showing I had entered a safe town area. At that moment, my shoulders relaxed, and I involuntarily sighed.

I was so exhausted from leaving early in the morning. Turning around, I imagined the rapier user behind me must feel worse, but the feet covered by knee-high boots did not seem to waver. Even with a few hours of sleep, one cannot completely recover from the exhaustion of three continuous days of hunting, so she must still be acting stubborn. When returning to town, the body and mind (for, in the virtual world, those two are essentially the same) should relax. I thought about voicing my thoughts, but the atmosphere seemed too solemn for idle talk.

In exchange, I turned toward the rapier user, and said, business-like.

"The meeting is supposed to take place in the town center, at 4pm in the afternoon."

"..."

The face hidden by the cloth hood, moved slightly up and down. However the feet did not stop, and the slender body passed by in front of me.

The breeze which blew in the valley town, caused her cape to sway while moving away. I opened my mouth slightly, but not finding anymore to say, closed it again. Thinking about it, I, who had been solo playing hard for three weeks, was not qualified to seek interaction with others. Up until now, I had only been spending days protecting my own life...

"A strange girl."

Suddenly I heard that murmur behind me, and I turned away from the back of the rapier user and looked around.

"...I thought she would soon die, but she did not. No matter how you look at it, she is a net game beginner, but her skill is fearsome. What kind of person is that."

The high pitched voice continued, ending its sentences with a special nasal inflection. This person did not possess a large build and instead was one or more heads shorter than me, but was still a incredible player. The armor, like mine, was full body cloth and leather. The weapon strapped on her left waist was a small claw and, on her right, were throwing nails. These were not weapons regularly

used by those who reach the front lines, but this person's greatest weapon was something else.

"What do you know about that fencer?"

I involuntarily inquired, but knowing the opponent's reply, I wrinkled my face. The claw user did not betray my expectations, as she held up five fingers and said.

"I'll sell it cheap. 500 coll."

Her grinning face has one big distinct feature. On both cheeks were three animal like whiskers drawn on with a make-up item. Matched with the curly auburn hair, her appearance reminded others of a certain rodent.

One time in the past, I asked why she used such markings. However, I only received a 'Don't ever ask the reason why a girl puts on makeup' reply, immediately followed by an angry outburst, 'I will tell you for 100,000 coll!' So, I had to hurriedly back down.

Someday, when I find a ultra rare item, I really will pay that 100,000 coll—as this secret vow continued to stick in my mind, I sourly replied.

"I feel awkward about buying a girl's information, so I will refrain from doing it."

"Nihihi, you have a good heart."

The person who said this at the limit of shamelessness was perhaps Aincrad's first informant; the one known as «Argo the Rat» laughed.

* * *

'—If you chat with «Rat» for five minutes, you'll end up paying for 100 coll worth of stories. Be careful.'

That was a warning by someone. However, the actual Argo replied she had not once sold free information for money. When a story was determined to have value, it would always have a price, since it would be hard-to-find «merchandise». Thinking about it, if a false story was sold, then the reliability of informant would drop. For a merchant, information gathering was a different breed of danger and trouble compared to gathering material items in dungeons and selling to NPCs in towns.

I considered asking a gender-based question, 'Why would a female player choose this kind of job'—but after seeing Argo's face, I had second thoughts about asking such a question. Even if I asked, she would ask for another '100,000 coll' for the answer, so instead I asked another question.

"So, today again, too? You aren't here for normal business talk, but as a negotiator for that mysterious person?"

Hearing this, Argo frowned and quickly glanced left and right of the street. She then pointed to a place behind me and we moved toward the nearby alleyway. The «Boss strategy conference» was still two hours away, so there were not many players here yet, but just in case, this was something she thought others should not overhear. The reason was that it was probably related to the mysterious person's reputation.

Argo stopped when we were deep in a small alley, leaned her back against a house—inhabited only by NPCs, of course—and nodded.

"Well, yea. It was raised to 29,800 coll."

"The offer has come to 29.8k coll now, huh."

I smiled wryly, then lowered my shoulders.

"...Sorry, but no matter how much coll is offered, my answer remains the same. I don't want to sell it."

"I already told the client that the last time."

Argo's main business is as an informant, but by using her very high dexterity stats for movement, she also maintains a side business as a «Messenger». Normally it was just oral messages or delivering a short message on a scroll, but after about one week since negotiations with her client, it was complicated... or rather, it was an annoying client.

He—or she—wanted to buy my one-handed longsword «Anneal Blade +6 (3S3D)».

Part 5

The weapon enhancement system in SAO was simple compared to those of recent MMORPGs. The enhancement parameters were Sharpness, Quickness, Accuracy, Heaviness, and Durability, five bonuses which could be given to a weapon by having NPC or player smiths to work on it. The parameter related material items required and the certain percentage of failure was similar to other MMORPGs.

No matter which parameter was given by enhancement, the item's name in the equipment window would have a +1 or +2 added on. However, that number's «breakdown» could only be seen when the

weapon was selected, while its property window was opened. For player-to-player sales, saying an item had 'Accuracy +1, Heaviness +2' and other stats quickly became tedious. Instead, players used a shorter notation: for example, a +4 with a breakdown of Accuracy +1, Heaviness +2 and Durability +1, would be denoted by the phrase «1A2H1D». This style of notation has already become quite commonplace.

This means, my «Anneal Blade +6 (3S3D)» was enhanced by Sharpness +3 and Durability +3. Having an item of this quality on the first floor actually required a lot of patience and luck. Because of this situation, not many players train smithing skills that have no direct relation to survival rate. But, I am uneasy about the skill level of the NPC smith shops, even though the NPC smiths do look dwarfish.

Before I enhanced it, my weapon, the «Anneal Blade», was the reward from a very difficult quest. Considering its current specs, it could well be the most wanted item from the first floor— however, that being said, it's still only a «Beginner's equipment». I could only enhance it a few more times at most and, around the 3rd or 4th floor, I would have to change to new sword anyway, so I didn't need to keep upgrading this one.

For the above reasons, I wondered why Argo's client was willing to pay such a large amount of coll—29.8k—for this sword. If this was a normal face-to-face transaction, I could ask for the reason directly, but that doesn't work when I don't even know the client's name.

"...The hush money the person paid was 1000 coll, right?"

At my inquiry, Argo calmly nodded and said.

"That's right. Are you willing to raise?"

"Hmm... 1k huh... hm—m!"

Hush money was the amount of coll Mr. X, who wanted to buy my sword, paid Argo to keep their name hidden from me. If I decided to pay the 1000 coll, Argo would instantly message her client to inform him that the hush amount was raised to 1200 coll, and ask if they would like to counter it. If YES was the reply, then this time I would be forced to choose whether to pay 1300 coll or not. If I win this raise and counter battle, then I would learn the opponent's name, but I would probably lose money in this «Sword deal», as a result. No matter how you think about it, that'd be idiotic to the extreme.

"...Good grief, you don't have to just sell information, since even when you're not selling something it's a business... that is one impressive merchant's soul..."

While I complained, Argo's whisker cheek relaxed into a snicker.

"That is real joy of trade. When I sell someone information, at that instant the story of «Someone bought such and such information» is born."

"...Tell me when a female player wants my personal information. I will buy her information."

Sighing as I said that, Argo once again gave a jolly laugh, then changed her expression.

"Then, I will tell the client the offer was rejected this time as well. Also, that this deal is impossible, too. See you then, Ki-bou."

With a hand wave, she turned around and, with titular «Rat»-like dexterity, left the alley. While I watched the auburn hair disappear into the crowd, I idly thought, 'That person surely won't die'.

After being trapped in death game SAO for one month, I have learned a few things.

The difference between life and death of players was separated by some key factors. Some of the defining elements were to carry a massive amount of potions and to know when to stop searching dungeons; but, one key factor between life and death was the unconditional belief in having «their own truth». Putting it another way, it was their «ultimate weapon» for survival.

In Argo's case, it was probably «Information». Dangerous monster locations or, on the other hand, the most efficient hunting locations, this person knows them all. Her belief in knowing created in her calmness, and increased her ability to survive.

So then, for me, my «Truth» was the sword on my back. To be more precise, it was when my body and sword become one, that moment of zen. I was not fully in that state all the time, but the single thought of "I want this world to be my own, and I will not die before that" kept me alive till now. The reason Anneal Blade's enhancement was Sharpness +3 and Durability +3, ignoring Quickness and Accuracy, was that the former two were merely simple number spec ups, while the latter were system-assisted enhancements which would change the feel of a sword swing.

However, then that means...

That rapier user I met today at the front lines of the maze. What was her «Truth»? I did move her unconscious body outside the maze (I

can't really say how I did it myself). But, on the other hand, even if I was not there, I believed the moment the next kobold appeared, she would involuntarily stand up and use that high speed «Linear» like a shooting star to kill the enemy... I had to think that way.

What made her fight such a bloodcurdling battle, and how had she managed to live until now? It was probably a «Strength» I didn't know about.

"...I should have paid Argo the 500 coll..."

I murmured with a small shake of my head.

The white-painted outer walls of the windmills surrounding Tolbana town were dyed with a slight orange color from the afternoon light. The time should be a bit after 3pm. To prepare for the approaching long boss strategy conference, I should go fill my stomach somewhere.

The meeting starting at 4pm would be, without a doubt, wild.

The reason was, for the first time today, one type of player that usually stayed hidden in the SAO world would show up in front of many normal players. That's right—«New Type Players» and «Experienced Beta Testers», a hard to fill void lay between them...

For «Argo the Rat» who sells anything that could be sold, there was only one type of information not in her merchandise. That was, who was originally a beta tester. Argo and I were sure that we were both beta testers, but we will never bring up this topic in conversation, no matter how many light years we had to travel.

The reason was simple. When a beta tester's identity was discovered, their life could be at stake.

Not by being killed by monsters in dungeons. But while they were walking outside safe areas, new type players could «Execute» you. Because they believed the one responsible for the death count of 2000 people in the first month was under the liability of the original beta testers.

And, for me, I could not totally dodge this bullet.

Part 6

Asuna's selection of food for the past three—or was it four—days consisted of the cheapest black bread from an NPC baker, and a bottle of water from one of the town's fountains.

She did not enjoy eating too much even in the real world, and the food in this virtual world was so empty that it was beyond description. No matter how much you ate, not a single grain of sugar would reach your real body. She thought it would be better if the food system, of hunger and full, did not exist at all. But, when your stomach was empty for a while, this virtual feeling of hunger would not dissipate until you had eaten something.

The time when she was in the dungeon, she could use willpower to stop the empty feeling in her stomach, but after returning to town, she needed to eat. To compensate for her lack of willpower, she bought the cheapest thing on the menu: a dry and rough-black bread. She experienced a strange frustration from the somewhat good taste by chewing on the bread little by little.

At the center of the town of Tolbana, Asuna sat on a simple wood bench beside the fountain and continued to silently chew the piece of bread in her mouth, hidden beneath the cover of her hood. Despite being a relatively large piece of bread, it was only worth 1 coll. She finally finished half of it before—

"That bread looks pretty delicious."

That familiar voice was coming from her right. She stopped her hand that was just about to tear off a piece of the bread, and threw a sharp glance.

The person who stood there was the man she had just left at the town entrance about a couple of minutes ago. The black hair and grey-coated single-handed sword user. He used some kind of method earlier to move her, who had fainted inside the depth of dungeon, outside. This troublesome person was the one that interfered with her supposed 'to be cut' path.

At the moment she realized that, her cheeks grew hot. After she said her ambition was to die, she was seen eating food which was meant for continued living. A strong embarrassment assaulted her whole body, and she did not know what to do at that moment.

While she was frozen, holding the half moon shaped black bread in her two hands, the man coughed, and said in a low whisper.

"May I sit next to you?"

Normally, she would have left the bench without a word, and moved away without turning back in this kind of situation. However, right now, she was assaulted by a type of distraction she rarely experienced in this world, so she could not react. Seeing Asuna's freeze as a sign of approval, the man sat down at the

furthest distance possible on her right side, and began searching in his coat pocket. What he took out was a black colored round object—a black bread worth 1 coll.

At that instant, Asuna forgot about her embarrassment and confusion momentarily, and in exchange looked at the man in amazement.

For someone who has the ability to go that deep in the maze, and the level of his full body armor and equipment, this swordsman should have enough money to easily select a course menu in a restaurant. If it's like this, he is either a super thrift person, or—

"...Seriously, you think it is delicious, don't you?"

Without her realizing, she asked the question aloud in a small voice. Hearing this, the man raised his eyebrow outrageously, and deeply nodded.

"Of course. After I came to this town, I eat it once a day. ...Well, I add a bit of a twist."

"A twist...?"

Not understanding the meaning, she shook her head under the hood. Instead of answering, the swordsman put his hand in the pocket opposite from the one earlier, and took out a small unglazed pot. He put it on the center of the bench, and said.

"Try using it on the bread."

The phrase 'use it on the bread' momentarily confused her, but she then realized it was a net game phrase, similar to «Use the key on the door» or «Use the bottle on the fountain». She hesitantly extended her right hand, and tapped the pot lid with her finger.

From the pop-up menu which appeared she selected «Use», and then her fingertip started to glow with a faint purple light. This condition was called «Target selection mode», which she then touched the half-eaten black bread in her left hand.

By doing so, with a small sound effect, one side of the bread was painted white. A lot, or more like thickly applied, no matter how you look at it—

"...Cream? From where would you get such a thing...?"

"This is the quest reward from «Cow's Counterattack» that I accepted one village back. Though, since it takes some time to clear, not many people do it."

After giving his serious answer, the swordsman mirrored the gesture to «Use the pot on the bread» as well. It may be because the contents were all used up, but the pot suddenly dispersed with a small sound and light effect. The swordsman opened his mouth wide, and bit into the bread that was now similarly piled mountain high with cream. Hearing the chewing sound effects, Asuna's own stomach which had been feeling an unpleasant pain for a long time, now had a healthy empty stomach feeling.

She hesitantly bit into the cream-covered black bread still held in her left hand.

At that moment, the texture of the normally dry and rough bread changed substantially. The taste of a certain rustic cake spread throughout her mouth; the cream was sweet and slippery, with a refreshingly sour yogurt taste. The inside of her cheeks were hit with jolts of electrifying fulfillment. Asuna dreamily stuffed her mouth with two, three bites.

When she came back to her senses, the bread that was in her hands, just like the word said, was completely gone. When she looked beside her, she seemed to have finished two seconds or so before the swordsman. Again, a strong embarrassment rose within her. She wanted to escape from this place, but having been treated to food, it would have been very bad on courtesy.

After breathing many times and calming down, Asuna said in a faint voice.

"...Thank you for the food."

"You're welcome."

The swordsman finished his own food, clapped the crumbs off his glove fingers, then continued.

"The cow quest I mentioned earlier, if you want to do it I can teach you some tips. If you do it efficiently, you can finish it in two hours."

"..."

To be honest, her heart was moved. With that yogurt cream, even the 1 coll black bread could become a magnificent feast. It was a fake fulfillment from the taste recreation engine, but to taste it once more... no, if possible, I want to eat it everyday, she thought.

However—

Asuna lowered her eyes, and shook her head within the hood.

"...It's okay. I did not come this far to this town just to eat delicious things."

"Hum. Then, for what purpose?"

The swordsman's sound, could not be said to be a beautiful voice, but there is not a single part of it that was unpleasing to the ear: it echoed like the voice of a youth. Maybe because of that, the emotions hidden deep in her heart—the one she never told anyone after coming to this world—slipped out without her consciously noticing it.

"I... want to prove that I exist. At first, I locked myself in a room of the city inn. But I decided, if I was going to slowly rot away, then I wanted to be myself up to the last moment. Even if I lose to a monster and die, this game... this world, I do not want to lose too. No matter what."

Asuna - Yuuki Asuna's 15 years of life, were a continuous battle. It began with the kindergarten entrance exam, then with many small and big tests after; Asuna overcame them all. It was set so that even one failure would make her a worthless person, so she continued to repel that weight.

A new challenge came upon her after 15 years of fighting: «Sword Art Online». However, she probably could not win against this test. Fighting against the unknown, with different rules and cultures, this was a type of battle a single person's strength could not do anything about.

This was the given winning condition: reach the top of the 100 floor floating castle, and kill the final enemy. However, one month after the game started, about one-fifth of the players retired—furthermore, most of them were experienced veterans. The remaining fighting force was small, and the path ahead was long...

After all that, the flood of words from Asuna's heart weakened and strengthened, as she spoke in trickles. The broken end portions were inconsistent monologues which the black-haired swordsman listened to in silence—eventually Asuna's voice was cut by the evening breeze, and then he quietly whispered one small word.

"...Sorry."

After a few seconds, Asuna wondered, 'Why would he say that?'

She met this swordsman for the first time today, there should be no reason for him to apologize. She glanced under her hood at the person beside her; the grey coat man was sitting lightly on the bench, leaning forward and resting both elbows on his knees. His lips moved slightly, and she heard his voice again.

"Sorry...—The current situation right now... or, in other words, what pushed you this far, in a sense, it might be my..."

However, she could not hear what was ahead. Standing tall at the center of the town, upon a huge windmill, a wind-powered clock sounded high and loud.

It was 4pm in the afternoon. The time the «Meeting» started. Looking around, Asuna saw that players had gathered at a nearby fountain, unknown since when.

"...Let's go. It's the conference you invited me to."

As Asuna remarked that and stood up, the swordsman nodded, and then slowly got up. What was he going to say—she probably was not going to talk to him again anyway, so it did not matter. But within that feeling, a thorn-like prickle of emotion existed.

I wanted to know. I didn't want to know. Which choice was on top, even Asuna herself did not understand.

Part 7

44 people.

That was the total number of players gathered at Tolbana's fountain clearing.

Compared to my predictions—that was, my expectations, all I could say was this was far too low. In SAO, the maximum size of a party was 6 people, and eight times that, for a total of 48 people made up a raid group. In order to have zero deaths while killing a floor boss, it would be difficult without at least two raid groups to switch between while fighting, but these numbers could not even fill up one raid party.

I breathed in air to sigh, but I lost my chance to breathe out.

"...This many..."

From behind me to my left, the rapier user in a hooded cape whispered. I involuntarily turned around and asked.

"Many...? This number of people?"

"Yes. That is... they gathered here for the first challenge against this floor's boss monster, right? Even though the chance of complete annihilation exists..."

"...I see."

I nodded, and then looked at the faces of the warriors gathered in threes or fives around the clearing again.

For about five or six people, I knew their name and level, and vice versa. Those included «Argo the Rat», who was leaning against a high wall on the other side of the clearing. Additionally, around fifteen of these people I had previously seen near the front line towns and dungeons. As for the remaining 20 plus people, I saw most of them for the first time. Of course, the male and female ratio was very extreme. For female players, by a quick glance, were probably only the rapier user and Argo, those two probably.

Indeed, no one had seen—that was, for this Aincrad—the first floor boss' challenge. Up until now on this floor, the chance of an HP gauge falling to zero—of risking death—was definitely the highest in this large-scale battle. As the rapier user said, everyone gathered at the plaza was prepared for their own death, and being here accepted becoming a stepping stone for players to come... that was what it meant, however...

"...No, not really..."

I unconsciously whispered. The rapier user sent me a questioning look from under her hood. Against that, I answered while carefully choosing my words.

"I cannot say this for everyone, but instead of «Showing the spirit of self-sacrifice», a lot of people should have come here with «Uneasiness about being left behind», too. Which it is for me, probably the latter..."

"...Left behind? From what?"

"From the front line. Total annihilation is scary, but being overcome by an unknown boss is scary, too."

The cloth hood tilt slightly. Since she was a complete net game beginner, she would be hard put to understand what I just said - was what I had thought.

"...That is like, not wanting to fall below the tenth place rank in your school year, or wanting to keep a z-score of 2. That kind of similar motivation?"

"..."

This time, it was my turn to be speechless. Thinking about it a bit, I nodded in a strange angle.

"Yea... well, probably... Maybe it's like that..."

Then—

Seen from under the hood, her nicely shaped lips slightly twisted upward. Fu, fu—a faint sound could be heard. Laughing... was that what it was? From the ultra perfect «Linear» skill user which had called my actions an "Unnecessary effort" when I moved her out of the maze?

I unconsciously wanted to look directly into her hood, but fortunately the situation changed before that. With a *Pan, Pan* hand-clapping sound, a well carried shouting voice passed throughout the plaza.

"O—K! Now then, it's five minutes late, but let's start! Everyone, a bit more to the front... there, come three more steps closer!"

The owner of the actually majestic voice was a tall, single-handed sword user with shiny metallic armor for each of his body parts. With a running start, he jumped onto the plaza fountain's edge. Jumping that high with his armor, he must have had very high strength and dexterity.

When they saw the back-turned swordsman, several people of the forty made a commotion. I understood what they were feeling. I, too, wondered: that man standing on the edge of the fountain, how was he so handsome, to a point which should not be possible in a VRMMO? In addition, his long hair flowing down in waves on either side of his face was dyed a brilliant blue. Since hair dying items were not sold in shops on the first floor, he must have hunted for a rare monster drop or bought it.

If he went to all that trouble to customize hair style and color for this gathering, with only two female players—although one of them was in a hooded cape so no one could not tell from the outside, while the other was «Rat»—I think he must have felt some reluctance, but the man completely deflected my suspicion with a refreshing smile and said.

"Today, thank you for coming to my call! Some people here know me, but I will again introduce myself! I am «Diabel», and my profession is «Knight»!"

With that, the people around the fountain gushed out whistles and clapping, mixed with 'You really wanted to say «Hero» right!' kind of calls came flying out.

For SAO, the job class did not exist in the system. Each player was given a number of «Skill Slots», and could freely select from

different skills and set them for training. For example, people with manufacturing or trade type skills as their main could be called a «Smith», «Seamstress», «Cook», or other such job titles—however, I have limited knowledge about the «Knight» and «Hero» classes, having not heard of them before.

But, no matter what kind of class a person called himself, it was his own freedom. Saying so, the man named Diabel was wearing bronze armor on chest, shoulders, arms and shins, with a large longsword on his left waist, and a kite shield on his back. You could say that was the right kind of equipment for a Knight.

That gallant appearance... while I stared at him from the back of the crowd, I searched through the index in my brain. His equipment and hair style was different so it was hard to connect, but this one month I remembered seeing him many times in the front line villages and towns. And then, how about before that—the «Another Aincrad», how about there. At least, I don't remember hearing his name before...

"Well then, about the reason I gathered you top players who are active on the very front lines, I don't think I need to say it..."

As Diabel's speech continued, I stopped my thoughts and concentrated on him. The blue-haired knight raised his right hand, pointed to the huge tower vaguely seen rising above the town skyline-the first floor maze—and continued.

"...Today, my party found the stairs going to the top most floor of that tower. That is, tomorrow—or, at the latest, the day after tomorrow—we will reach it: the first floor's... boss room!"

The players made a large commotion. I was a little surprised, too. The first floor maze had 20 floors; I (and the rapier user beside me), went to the 18th floor today, around the 19th floor stair area. I did not know that the 19th floor was already mapped so thoroughly.

"One month. Coming this far took one month... Even so, we have to set an example. Kill the boss, and reach the 2nd floor! We have to show that this death game can be cleared to everyone waiting at the Starting City. That is the obligation of us top players here! Isn't that right, everyone!"

Again, cheers. This time, there were people clapping who were not Diabel's friends. Actually what was being said was honorable and nothing was hidden. No, it's strange to even think about anything hidden in those words. Right now, I should be like the once-divided players on the front lines and buy the Knight's story, giving him applause—

"Wait a minute, Knight-san."

At that moment, a low voice flowed out.

The cheering immediately stopped, and the front of the crowd split into two. At the center of the emptied space was a somewhat short and stockily built man. From my position, I could only see a somewhat large single-handed sword on his back, and some kind of pointed, cactus-styled brown hair.

Taking one step forward, the cactus head growled in a deep, gravelly voice that was opposite of Diabel's beautiful voice.

"Before that, there is one thing that must be cleared up; otherwise I cannot join you."

Diabel's eyes became small for an instant, but soon returned to full smiles and said while beckoning.

"Opinions are certainly very welcome. But, if you are going to speak, you should tell us your name."

"...Hum."

Cactus head gave a huge snort, then stepped forward. When he reached the fountain, he turned around to face us.

"I am «Kibaou»."

Part 8

The cactus head swordsman who introduced himself with a somewhat daring character name looked at all the players in the plaza with his small but sharp, bright eyes.

His horizontally moving look stopped for just an instant on my face—or I thought he did. I didn't remember his name, nor where we could have met before. After taking plenty of time to look at everyone once, Kibaou eventually said in a threatening tone of voice.

"In there, about 5 or 10 people need to apologize."

"Apology? To whom?"

The knight that was still standing behind him on the fountain edge, Diabel, raised both hands in question. Without looking at him, Kibaou spit out in hatred.

“Ha, isn’t it obvious. To the 2000 now dead people. Those guys had monopoly on everything, and 2000 people died in one month! Isn’t that right?!”

At that moment, the low buzzing in the forty people audience cut short; all went silent. What Kibaou wanted to say, everyone finally understood. Me included, of course.

In the oppressive silence, only the evening BGM from the NPC orchestra played quietly. No one said anything. If anything was said, then at that moment you might be labeled as one of «those guys»—such a fear was probably there. No, not probably. At the very least, I was clearly caught by that fear...

“—Kibaou-san. Your «those guys» are... the original beta testers, right?”

Diabel with his arms crossed, showed the most stern look up till now as he asked for confirmation.

“Obviously.”

With the thick metal pieces of his scale mail clinking over the leather he wore, Kibaou took a glance at the knight behind him and continued.

“Those beta testers, on the day this shitty game started, dashed from the Starting City and disappeared. They left behind over 9000 people who didn’t know left from right. They monopolized good hunting grounds and profitable quests, got stronger without a care for those behind. ...There should be some in this group, hiding their beta status, some sly people thinking of joining the boss fight. I want them to kneel down once, to the party members their lives depend on. That’s what I want to say!”

Like his name[1], he cut off his condemnation with a bite of his teeth. Still, no one said anything. As a member of the original beta tester group, I ground my teeth, held my breath, and continued to keep silent.

It was not that I didn't want to shout back a retort such as, 'The original beta testers, do you think that none of them died?'

About one week earlier, I bought information from Argo—to be exact, I asked her to check on something. To find out the death count for the original beta testers.

The SAO closed beta which was conducted during summer vacation only accepted 1000 people. Everyone was given the right to buy the official release first, but since login time was near testing period, my guess was that not all 1000 testers moved to the official service. Probably, 700 or 800 people—that, was the total number of original beta testers at the start of the game.

However, finding out «Who is an original beta tester» was not that simple. If the player color cursor had a [β] mark, then of course it would be easy—having said that, it could be called fortunate that such a mark did not exist. As for our avatar's appearance, the GM Kayaba Akihiko had set everyone's appearance to be the same as in reality. The only thing we can go with was name, but many probably were changed from the beta to official release. Incidentally, the reason Argo and I are sure each other was an original beta tester was related to how we first met, but that was another story.

Anyway, for those reasons, Argo's research should have been very difficult. However, it only took 3 days for her to give me a number.

[1] Kibaou, one translation of this name can be 'Fang King'

About 300 people. That, was Argo's estimate of the original beta tester deaths.

If that number was correct, that means, within the current death count of 2000, 1700 are new participants. As a percent, new player death rate was about 18%. On the other hand, original tester death rate was - close to 40%.

Prior knowledge and experience did not always mean safety. Conversely, they could be a trap. For me, who accepted a quest on the first day of the death game, I almost died. Also, there are external factors. In this SAO official service, the geography, monsters, and items are mostly the same as in the beta test, but once in a while, just a slight difference, like a small deadly poisonous needle...

"May I speak?"

At that time, a rich and forceful baritone resounded in the evening plaza. I returned from my thoughts and raised my head. From the left side of the crowd, a silhouette moved forward.

Huge. His height was easily over 180cm, probably. An avatar's size was said not to have any effect on his stats, but the two-handed battle-axe slung over his back actually seemed light weight to him.

His appearance, too, was impressive and did not lose to his weapon. A fully bald head, and chocolate-colored skin. However, the chiseled face was so fitting you might think it was customized. Not Japanese... instead of saying that, maybe he was not even human.

The muscular giant moved forward to the fountain, lightly bowed to the other players, and then turned to the dramatically different in height Kibaou.

"My name is Egil. Kibaou-san, what you wanted to say is that many beginners died because original beta testers did not take care of them, and you want them to accept that responsibility and apologize, isn't that right?"

"Th...That's right."

Kibaou, momentarily overwhelmed, took a step back, but then soon moved back forward. With his shiny, small eyes glaring at the axe user called Egil, he shouted.

"If they did not leave us behind, 2000 people would not have died! However, they are not just any 2000 people, most of them were other MMO top ranks or veterans! If those shitty testers properly shared information, items and money, then there would have been 10 times the people here... no, by now we would have broken through the 2nd or 3rd floor!!"

—300 of that 2000, are what you called 'shitty testers'!

I desperately kept myself from shouting that. I could not yet show a basis for the number 300, and it was scary to be hung; such trivial reasons held me back. However, before that, I didn't think it would be wise to show my original tester status in my objection in this situation.

Right now, about four to five hundred remaining original testers were mixed dangerously with new participants. Level and equipment-wise, they no longer could be said to stand out. In this situation, if I showed myself as original tester, a dangerous thing like witch hunt might happen instead of improving contact between players. At worst, the front line players, new beginners, and original testers might split up and start a war. That had to be avoided no

matter what. The reason was, for SAO, player attacks were allowed in fields and dungeons, such as the «Outer Area»...

"That is what you said, Kibaou-san. I don't know about money and items, but I think there is information."

While I lowered my eyes miserably, Egil the axe warrior again responded in wonderful baritone. From the huge pouch on his muscled, leather armor-covered waist, he took out a simple sheepskin-bound book item. The cover had round ears and three whiskers stylized with a «Rat Mark».

"This guidebook, you got it too right. Freely distributed from the item shop in Horunka and Medai."

"...Fr-Freely distributed?"

I involuntarily leaked that small voice. That, from the cover marking, was Argo the Rat's merchandise, the «Strategy Guide by Area». It had detailed information on areas about monster appearance, drop items, and even quest-related explanations. On the bottom of the cover was written, [It's fine. This is Argo's strategy guide.] That kind of catch-phrase was not an exaggeration. A bit embarrassing but I bought the whole set to supplement my memory—then, if I remember right, each book should be 500 coll, a pretty respectable price...

"...I got it too."

Beside me, the up-until-now silent rapier user whispered. I inquired with "For free?", and she nodded.

"There's a commission to the item shop owner, but since the price is 0 coll, everyone got it. It became useful very quickly."

"Wh...What's going on..."

That «Rat»—she was such a devil merchant that she would sell her own stats if that would make money. But, freely distribute information? It wasn't possible! I shifted my gaze; the stone wall Argo was quietly sitting on a few minutes earlier was empty. The next time I met her, I wanted to ask for the reason why, but somehow I could already see her answer: "That information is 1000 coll".

"—Got it. What about it?"

Kibaou's sharp voice interrupted my thought process. Egil put his strategy guide back in his pouch, and said with arms crossed.

"This guide, whenever I reach a new village or town, is always found in the item shop. It's the same for you right. The information is too fast, don't you think?"

"So, what about too early or whatever!"

"The ones who provided information on monsters and map data in this, cannot be anyone other than the original beta testers."

All the players went abuzz. Kibaou closed his mouth sharply, and the knight Diabel behind him nodded in a 'I see' way.

When looks were directed on Egil, he said with his well carrying baritone.

"You see, there is information. Still, a lot of players died. That reason is because they are veteran MMO players, I think. They measured the similarity of SAO to other games, and missed the point of difference. But, right now is not the time to be going after

who is responsible. That we become those or not, and how that influences this meeting, is what I think."

Part 9

The two-handed axe user Egil possessed a very imposing attitude, and his argument was also extremely blunt, such that Kibaou could only stand in the shadows in silence. If anyone else other than Egil claimed the same thing, then Kibaou would probably counter with 'Saying that means you are a original beta tester', I think. But, right now, all he could do was glare at the giant in hatred.

Behind the two confronting each other in silence, Diabel, still standing on the fountain's edge, his long hair dyed purple from the evening sun, waved as he nodded once more.

"Kibaou-san, I can understand your point. I too went into unknown fields, and finally arrived here after many near deaths. But, like this Egil-san said, isn't it time to look forward right now? Even original beta testers... no, especially original testers, we need their fighting strength for this boss strategy. If we remove them, and that resulted in the attack failing, what would be the point?"

This truly was a self proclaimed knight, I remembered; he too had given a refreshing speech. Many in the audience deeply nodded. I felt the atmosphere change from 'Convicting original testers,' and I involuntarily breathed out a sigh of relief. I realized it was shameful of me, but then listened to Diabel's continuing speech.

"Everyone, you each have what your own preferences, but right now I would like you to work together to break through the first floor. If there are people who will not fight with original testers no matter what, then it is unfortunate, but you are free to leave. For a boss fight, teamwork is the most important."

The knight's look swept through everyone, and finally stopped at Kibaou. The cactus head swordsman made a huge snort then spit out words.

"...Fine, I will listen to you for now. But, after the boss fight is finished, I want it to be clear black and white."

With his scale mail clinking, Kibaou retreated from the group's front. The axe user Egil too, spread his arms showing that he had nothing more to say, and returned to where he was before.

Ultimately, that was the highlight of this first meeting. Because, even if we wanted to discuss the details of boss strategy, we had only arrived at the top floor of the maze. In a situation where no one had seen the boss' face, a strategy could not be made...

—No, the truth was a little different. Because I know that Aincrad's first floor boss was a super sized Kobold, its weapon was a huge Talwar, and once engaged 12 heavy armor royal guards would spawn.

On one hand, if I showed my original tester status and provided information on the boss, our chance of success might increase by a bit. However, then they would ask 'Why did you stay silent until now,' and a chance that the 'hanging original testers' atmosphere reappear.

Also, my knowledge was from the old Aincrad. When official service began, the chance that boss might be completely, or just in some small detail, changed. If we based our strategy on information from beta, when we actually fight the boss, if its appearance or attack pattern was different... or other things happened, then the raiders would be annihilated by too much confusion. What it comes down to was, until the boss room door is opened and its owner appeared, nothing could start.

Half of my reasoning was to convince myself, as I continue to keep my mouth closed.

At the end of the meeting, the knight Diabel raised his straight forward voice, and let out a huge roar to the participants. I just raised my right hand for show. As for the rapier user beside me, let's not talk about shouting; she did not even move her hand from the cape. Before the word "Dismissed" even disappeared, she had already turned around. Before she left, only I heard her low whisper.

"Before the meeting, you said something... if we both live through the boss fight, tell me what you said."

To the back disappearing into the dim road, I answered without a sound.

—Sure, at that time, I will tell you. That for my own survival, I threw away everything else.

* * *

Though the meeting was without any actual discussion, even so it seemed to have boosted the players moral, and the 20th floor of first floor maze was mapped in a never before seen speed. The afternoon

of the day after the meeting—Saturday, December 3rd—the first party (this time too was Diabel's party of six), discovered huge double doors deep within the maze. Their cheers reached me who was solo fighting nearby.

Diabel's group bravely opened the boss room door, and saw the inhabitant's face. On the evening of that day, at another meeting in Tolbana's fountain plaza, the blue hair knight reported back.

The boss was a huge Kobold, 20 meters in height. Its name was «Illfang the Kobold Lord», and its weapon was of the scimitar category. When engaged, three metallic armor, halberd wielding «Ruin Kobold Sentinels» appeared—

The information up until there was exactly the same as in beta. If I remembered correctly, the «Sentinels» would reappear when the boss lost one of its four HP bars, with 12 in total which must be killed, but as usual I do not have the courage to say that in the meeting. Anyway, the actual fight would not occur too soon, with many scouting fights this will soon be known information—that's what I wanted to say to myself, but something which made my worries worthless was discovered in the middle of the meeting.

Somehow, at the open air NPC stall shop near the plaza, «That thing» was for sale since who knows when. Made up of three bound sheep skin, instead of a book, it was just a pamphlet. Argo's Strategy Guide: First Floor Boss edition—it said. Price was 0 coll from the start.

Of course the meeting was paused for a while as everyone bought (or more like got) the guide from the NPC, and started reading.

Same as usual, there was an impressive amount of information. From the recently known boss name to its estimated HP, main weapon of Talwar and its sword speed, damage amount, to sword skills, this information filled up three pages. The fourth page explained the fact about the «Sentinels»; there, it was clearly written that it will pop four times, up to a total of 12.

And also, on the cover of the guide, a line that did not exist on «Argo Strategy Guide» until now, in bright red font, said—

[The information is from the time of the SAO beta test. It is possible the current version might be different.]

When I saw that, I raised my head in reaction, and looked around the plaza for Argo. However, I could not find the «Rat» in dull leather armor. I lowered my head again, and murmured.

"...Invaded..."

This red warning line might have destroyed Argo's current status—«Just an informant selling information obtained from beta testers no one knew». Almost everyone reading this, would begin to wonder whether Argo herself was a original tester or not. Of course there was no proof, but later, if the feud between new players and original testers expanded more than it was now, there was no doubt the danger of her being hung would increase.

On the other hand, this strategy guide, would surely avoid some troublesome and dangerous scouting battles. The forty people who read that, as if to let their leader decide how to react, looked at the blue hair knight standing on the fountain's edge like yesterday.

Diabel seemed to lower his head in deep thought for tens of seconds, and then eventually stood up straight and shouted.

"—Everyone, right now, let's be thankful for this information!"

The audience was washed in a buzz. That speech, instead of confrontation with original testers, chose reconciliation. I thought Kibaou would again jump out growling, but the brown cactus head near the front of the crowd was standing still now.

"Aside from the source, but thanks to this guide, we can skip two of three days of scouting battles. Actually, this is very thankful, I think. Because, the most deaths probably will be from scouting battles."

Here and there in the plaza, different colored heads nodded.

"...If this is true, the boss' numerical stats are not all that bad. If SAO was a normal MMO, then everyone with an average of three... no, under level five would be plenty to kill it, I think. So, if we polish our tactics correctly, bring a lot of POTs to the fight, it's possible we can kill it without any deaths. No, sorry, not that. Absolutely zero deaths. That, I promise you in the name of the knight!"

'Yo, knight-sama!' and other sounds came flying, loud clapping continued. Diabel was someone with good leadership, even the soloist me has to accept. Guilds could not be made until the third floor, but at that time an impressive conquest guild would probably be made...

I was feeling various degrees of admiration, but with the knight's continuing speech, I choked slightly.

"—Then, it's a bit fast, but I am thinking of starting the actual strategy meeting now! Anyway, if we don't make a raid party, we cannot split up our duties. Everyone, first make a party with friends or people near you!"

...What did he say?

With a freeze which remind me of elementary school gym classes, I hurriedly calculated in my head. In SAO, one party was 6 people, there are 44 people here so... 7 parties plus 2 people left over. If the aim was to be even, then four 6-person parties, and four 5-person parties might be best? But in that case, without the leader's order it's not that easy...

For my round and about high speed thought, the result made it useless. Because, in under one minute after Diabel's directive, seven 6-person parties were quickly formed. They understood the knight wanted to make 6 person parties. The no-matter-how-you-look-he-is-a lone wolf Kibaou, and the lofty-looking giant Egil too soon found 5 friends. Maybe the only person who did not say 'Let's fight together' was me only—

No, that was not right.

When I glanced around, I discovered the hooded cape rapier user standing around by herself, and I quickly approached her.

"...You got left out too?"

To my quiet inquiry, a hot, angry glare came from her hood, and at the same time a suppressed voice replied.

"...Not left out. The people around me seemed to be friends, so I refrained."

That was what left out meant—

I wanted to correct her, but was wise with prudence, and instead just nodded seriously and said.

"Then, how about forming a party with me? A raid is up to eight parties; if we don't do that we cannot join."

It seemed going about it in a systematic way was correct, as the rapier user seemed to hesitate for a moment, then snorted and said.

"Since you invited me, I will have to accept."

Here, she gave me a 'you asked first so you invite' kind of childish expression, which I graduated from the previous month. So, I nodded and touched her color cursor in my view to send the party invitation. The rapier user pushed OK with a curt gesture, and then in the left side of my view, a second small HP gauge appeared.

Under it displayed a short combination of letters, which I gazed at.

[ASUNA]. That, was the name of the mysterious fencer who possessed the godly fast «Linear».

Part 10

The knight Diabel's command ability, not just speech, was also pretty good in particle aspect too.

He checked over the seven 6 person party, and with the smallest number of switches, made seven parties with different purpose. Two heavy armor Tank parties. Three high movement and high attack Attacker parties. Two long weapon equipped Support parties.

The two tank parties will maintain and exchange being the boss' target. Two attacker parties concentrate on the boss, the other one kill the guards first. The support parties mostly using long weapons

will use Delay skill as main, if possible interrupt the boss or guards' attacks.

Simple, but this way not many holes, I think it's a good tactic. While I was in admiration, the knight at last went to the good-for-nothing two person party (of course, that's me and the rapier user) front, after thinking for a while, he said refreshingly.

"You two, make sure none of the Kobold guards remain, please support the E group."

Put it another way, 'Don't interfere with the boss fight and stay quietly at the back', I felt that it could mean this. When I noticed the the rapier user «Asuna» beside me was going to give an unfriendly response, I stopped her with one hand and replied.

"Understood. That's an important role, leave it to us."

"Yes, I am counting on you."

With a white flash of his front teeth, the knight returned to the fountain. At that moment, close to my left ear, a sharp sounding voice is heard.

"...What important duty. It would end without a single attack on the boss."

"We can't do anything about it, we only have two people. There is not enough time for Switch and Pot rotation."

"...Switch? Pot...?"

Hearing that questioning whisper, I once again thought. This rapier user, really left the Starting City as a beginner without any knowledge, and came all the way here by herself. Probably with five

non-enhanced rapiers bought from shop, and relying on just one sword skill «Linear»—

"...Later, I will explain in detail. If we talk here it will never end."

'Don't need', I guessed it would be over 50% this kind of response, after the rapier user was silence for a few seconds, she lightly nodded.

* * *

The second boss strategy conference was over after a short talk between group leaders assigned letters A to G, and setting up how to share boss drop coll and items. The axe user giant Egil was Tank group B leader, and Kibaou who had burning enmity towards original beta testers is Attacker group E leader. Since group E is for killing guard Kobolds, the rapier user and I, the left over combination, will be helping Kibaou. To tell the truth, that is an opponent I didn't want to be too close to, but he did not know that I am original tester—supposedly. Just to add, the «Rat» was not in the raid. Of course, I did not mean to blame her. With that «Strategy Guide», her task is plenty completed.

For drop sharing, coll will be automatically divided evenly between the 44 raid members, items will belong to the person who gets it, that kind of simple rule was used. In recent MMO, normally a system whereas a person who wants an item will dice roll for it, but somehow SAO used the previous era's method like randomly dropping the item in a player's storage, without anyone else knowing too. That means if a «Boss drop item will be dice roll» kind of rule was set, then the person with the actual item have to report it. I have experienced this many times in beta test, that is a big test of

willpower. In actuality, after a boss fight no one will say anything (that is someone kept the drop), there were many very awkward raid disbands.

Diabel, probably to prevent that kind of development, used the «Drop to person» rule. That is a very observant knight.

At 5:30pm in the afternoon, the similar to yesterday 'Let's work hard!' and 'Yea—!' messages completed the meeting, and groups split into threes and fives disappeared inside bars and restaurants. While moving my tense shoulders, I wonder if this stiffness is an illusion, or if the real body is actually tense, it would not matter—

"...So, the explanation, where shall we do it?"

...'What did you say', I was confused for a moment, then I hurriedly faced the rapier user.

"Ah, ah... I am fine with anywhere. How about that bar?"

"...No. I don't want to be seen."

That speech almost stabbed into me, then I supplemented it as instead of not «together with me», it was not «together with any male player» and revived my spirit, I somehow managed to calmly nod.

"Then, how about a NPC house... but, someone might enter. An inn room can be locked, but that's no good either right."

"Of course."

A dagger like cutting voice, this time I sustained a light piercing damage. Since this is a virtual world, I could somehow manage to talk to female players, but up till one month ago, I was a 2nd year

middle school student whose interpersonal skill was so low that I even had difficulty communicating with my sister. Anyway, out of all solo players, how did only I end up in this kind of situation. That was because nothing could be done without joining the boss fighting group, thinking about it, all other seven parties are male groups, if I had went into those it would be over without so much concern...

While I was thinking about many things, the rapier user sighed and continued.

"...Anyway, the private room at inns in this world, most could not even be called a room. A space under 6mat with a bed and table only, that takes 100 coll a night. Eating does not really matter, but I want sleep to be real, and to sleep in a bit better room."

"Eh... Re-Really?"

I extended my neck without thinking.

"If you look for it, you can find better conditions right? That, will cost a bit more though..."

"Even if you say search, there are only three inns in this town. The rooms are similar everywhere."

Hearing that reply, I finally understood.

"Ah... I see. You only checked places with [INN] signboards?"

"Since... INN means inn."

"That is true, at lower floors in this world, it means a place that is the cheapest you can sleep in. Rooms that you can rent with coll, there are a lot of them other than at inns."

After I said to that point, the rapier user's lips became round.

"Wh... You should have said that earlier..."

After finally getting this kind of retort, I grin and started boasting about the room I am renting now.

"What I rented in this town is, a farmer's 2nd floor costing 120 coll a night, but it has two rooms with all the milk you can drink, the bed is large and view is nice, above that there is also bathroom attached..."

I got carried away and said up to that point, at that moment...

The rapier user's right hand that moved that godly speed «Linear» I saw in the dungeon, grabbed my grey coat's collar with a force that almost activated the violation prevention code. Next, a low husky voice, sounded with lots of force.

"...What did you say?"

Part 11

The following words were all once said by herself: Regarding all of the events of this world, there is only one that is true, and that is "sleep".

And this is what Asuna thought.

Everything else was virtual – walking, running, talking, eating, and fighting, it would not be a lie to say that all these actions were nothing but numbers spewed out from Sword Art Online's algorithms. No matter what the virtual body did, the real world's

body that was lying down somewhere would not move an inch. The only exception was, when the virtual body laid down on a bed and entered the world of dreams, the real body's brain probably did the same. So when sleeping at the inns of the street area, it was necessary to let the self fall into a state of sleep, but this could sometimes be a difficult task.

In areas with monsters or the dungeon areas, mind and body would be caught in the heat of battle, so there would be no time at all to sit back and reflect. But the moment she returned to the street area and laid down on the bed of an inn's rented single room, everything that happened during the month would replay itself in her mind. Why is it that at that time, she would produce such painful thoughts in her mind? Why was it, that she was not satisfied after touching the Nerve Gear? Why did she have to take the GEAR helmet and place it over her head, saying "Link Start"—

Taking this kind of regret with her into sleep is no doubt a recipe for nightmares. At a time when her classmates would half-joke about the importance of the winter of third year in junior high, she who had been ever running forward was suddenly stopped by a game. In the next several years, her relatives would pity this girl that retreated from the race of life. And—staring at her sleeping body in some hospital, with expressions that she could not see, were her parents.

With a trembling body, she suddenly sat up, looking at the time displayed in the lower left corner of her vision. Even though a long time had passed, the actual amount of time she had slept was only about three hours. After that, though she had kept her eyes shut, she simply could not fall asleep. Then again, if she didn't sleep so little

every night, there would have been no way for her to fiercely fight continuously for three days in the dungeons.

Because of all this, Asuna had always wanted to spend the money she saved up on a high-class bedroom with a comfortable bed. Speaking of the rooms in inns, they were all narrow and dark, with beds made out of unknown materials that were too hard to sleep on. If it was high resilience high-tech urethane foam made in Italy...or even plain old cotton, sleep time should be increased from three hours to four. Another point was, there ought to be at least a shower in the room. Even though bathing is nothing more than a virtual experience and the real world's body would have been kept hygienic by the hospitals, this was a matter of mood. Having nearly died of losing consciousness while fighting solo on the lowest floor, even if it was would only be virtual, she really wanted to dip her feet into some warm water...

—It should be because of these desires gaining intensity, that Asuna would say the following words to the black hair one-handed sword user.

".....What did you say?"

Asuna asked with a hoarse voice, while subconsciously grabbing the other party's collar. What she heard just now couldn't just be an auditory hallucination, right? The swordsman really said...

"Th—There's milk for drinking.....?"

"After that."

"Fr—From the bed, you can see the beautiful landscape.....?"

"After that still!"

"Th—There's a bathroom.....?"

—Seems like it was not just an auditory hallucination after all.
Asuna let go of his collar, hurriedly asking:

"You said that your room, to stay one night is 120 coll?"

"Yes...Yes I did say that."

"That room, how many of those are still available? What's the location? I want to rent one too, please show me the way to it."

The swordsman finally realized the situation. He coughed once, put on a solemn face, and said:

"Just now, didn't I just say that I rented the second floor of a farmer's house?"

".....You did say that."

"I meant that I rented out the entire second floor. There is no unused room. Incidentally, there are no rooms for rent on the first floor."

"Wha—....."

In that moment, her knees became weak and she was just barely able to stand.

".....that, that room....."

Though she only said that, the other party was probably aware of what was omitted. His black eyes flitted about, and with an apologetic expression he said:

"About that, actually, I am already very satisfied with my week living in that room, so I would not mind giving it to you....In fact, I

have already paid the rental system for the maximum number of days...ten days' worth of rent. So, there's no way to cancel it."

"..."

Asuna struggled to stay upright, seemingly conflicted about what to do.

In addition to the inns, there are other places to rent a room, and even luxurious rooms too. That is what the swordsman had just told her. If it's like that, then as long as she put in the effort to search, maybe there were still available rooms in Tolbana village that she could find. But within this single village, dozens of top players had already gathered here to party up for clearing the floor. Good rooms were probably all taken, and that's exactly why this black hair swordsman had paid rent for the maximum number of days.

If it's like that, then what if she just went to the previous village? But, after sunset there would be aggressive and strong monsters roaming about, and tomorrow morning she had to meet with the clearing group on time at the fountain square. Even though she had little interest in this boss clearing group, it was simply not in her character to disregard her duty and arrive late—for so trivial a reason, no less.

So then, there was only one option left.

For a few seconds, Asuna felt her heart tangling itself up. If this were the real world, even if the sky and earth turned upside down she would not do such a thing. But, this was merely a virtual world made of numbers and data, and her body was also no different. Besides, the person in front of her eyes could not be considered a complete stranger anymore. They had eaten bread together, and

partied together for the boss fight, and, that's right, this man had also promised to instruct her about that quest. If she wanted to listen to him, then that should be a proper excuse...she definitely could. Probably.

She looked at the swordsman who had remained anxiously attentive, then suddenly lowered her head—using a voice that could only be heard by his ears, and said:

".....let me go to where you live. And your bathroom, let me borrow it."

* * *

The farmer's house that the black hair swordsman had rented was near a small pasture in the eastern part of Tolbana. It was larger than she had expected. If she included the section for the ox-carts in her calculations, the place would be about as big as Asuna's house in the real world.

Hidden beside the residence was a beautiful stream, and it would flow through the waterwheel making *pitter-patter* sounds. Arriving at the porch of the main two-story building, which the NPC farmer family was living on the first floor, at the hallway Asuna was greeted by the smiling face of the mistress. The old woman who was sleeping as she sat on a rocking chair near the fireplace then suddenly raised her head. A gold «!» symbol —— A quest starting mark indication —— floated overhead, but she ignored it for now.

Asuna followed the swordsman up to the second floor, where there was but one door at the end of the short corridor. The swordsman

touched the door and, automatically, there was a sound of a lock opening. Had it been Asuna who touched it, this door would definitely not have unlocked. It was impossible to unlock rooms rented out to players even if someone had the «Lock Picking» skill.

".....W..Well, please come in."

The swordsman pushed open the door, and made an awkward welcoming gesture.

".....Thanks."

Expressing her gratitude in a low voice, Asuna then entered the room —— and at that moment, she cried out unintentionally.

"W..What is this? So large..... T..This and my room is only twenty coll difference!? I..Isn't it too cheap.....?"

"Being able to find the room like this quickly is an important skill not included in the system. .....Well, for my situation....."

Asuna glanced at the swordsman who unnaturally cut off his words before slightly shaking his head. She then looked inside the room again and let out a big sigh.

The room was at least twenty-tatami. The door to the bedroom could be seen on the east wall, that room was certainly about the same size. Then the western wall had the door with a [Bathroom] plate on it. Asuna could feel a magic force of attraction from those eccentric typefaced alphabets. Taking advantage of the relaxed atmosphere, the swordsman quickly unequipped his sword, gloves, and boots, and submerged his body into the soft looking sofa.

After watching Asuna, who was lost in thought for a while, the swordsman cleared this throat and said,

"Erm, well, you probably can tell just by looking, the bathroom is there..... F..Feel free to use it."

"Ah..... o-okay."

Asuna couldn't believe that she would suddenly rush into the bathroom right after entering someone else's room, but now was not the time to be reserved either. "Well, then...", she muttered while she moved to the door, and the swordsman's voice followed,

"Oh yes, I need to tell you just in case, it won't be the same as bathing in the real world. Nerve Gear seems weak at recreating a liquid environment..... So, don't set your expectations too high."

".....Just hot water is sufficient, I don't expect any more than that."

Responding with her true feelings, Asuna opened the bathroom door.

Part 12

.....Aside from the hot water, another thing that concerned her was the lock of the bathroom.

As she stared at the closed door, although she wanted to rely on herself to feel at ease, this was impossible. She could not find things like a notch or a button in the vicinity of the door knob. Since this room was not rented by Asuna, the menu to operate the room could not be called.

That said, the absence of a single key was extremely trivial in this situation. Why? Having rushed into the room belonging to a man

she just met yesterday, because he said he'd lend a bath to her. The dark haired one-handed swordsman —— come to think of it, she still doesn't know his name —— his age and character were also unknown, but he shouldn't be the type to break into the bathroom, probably. Well, even if he rushed in, as this was within the «City boundary», the «Crime prevention code» would activate, so he won't be able to do anything anyway.

Thinking up until this point, Asuna turned away from the door, and faced the southern side.

".....Aah....."

She unintentionally let out a low voice.

This room was too spacious. The northern half was the place to remove clothes. The floor was covered by a thick carpet. Fixed to the wall was a solid shelf made of wood. Half of the southern side was covered in polished stone tiles, while the majority was occupied by a boat-like white bathtub.

On top of the western brick wall, a hot water outlet that looked like a monster's head was inlaid, which spewed out large quantities of transparent liquid out of its mouth. The bath tub slowly filled with water and white steam, until the water reached the edge and overflowed, and drained off in a corner tile.

——*based on common sense, the architectural model of this house should be from Medieval Europe. Otherwise, the hot water supplying equipment would not be this large.* But Asuna did not have the mood to complain about incomplete research in the virtual world. She brought up the Main Menu window and moved to the

display on right side of the screen's «equipment figure» and pressed the button to unequip all her armor and weapons.

The hooded cloak she was wearing now, copper armor covering her chest, both her long gloves and long boots, and the rapier hanging by her waist, all disappeared. Straight long chestnut hair flowed behind her body. The only clothes that remained were the three-quarter sleeved cotton wool top and tight leather pants. The button just now became «Remove all clothes», and she pressed that button again. The tunic and pants disappeared, leaving only two simple pieces of cotton underwear.

Asuna looked at the door again, then pressed the button that had became «Remove all underwear». With these three operations, the virtual body became completely naked. A virtual sense of cold brushed across her skin. In the oddly named Aincrad, the seasonal changes synchronised with reality, and because the real world was currently in early December, it was pretty cold indoors.

Hurriedly rushing across the bathroom, she reached the ceramic bathtub, and submerged her left leg into the hot water, causing complicated sensory signals to be generated in her brain. Enduring the urge to splash her whole body with water, she first put her head to shower from the mouth of the monster's head, and as the warm sensation covered her body,and the temperature difference between her body and the atmosphere was reduced——

Splash.

Her entire back was submerged.

".....Uaaa....."

Asuna could not help but issue that sound again.

Indeed, just like the black haired swordsman had said, the bathroom in the real world could not be reproduced. The feeling of hot water against the skin, the water pressure against the body, the light reflecting off the surface of the water, everything subtly left a feeling of strangeness.

To some extent, eating was the same, the default «bathing experience» program operation, as long as you closed your eyes and stretched out your arms and feet, the subtle feeling above could no longer be felt. This is a bath. Moreover, the wasted hot water still flowed out of the nearly two meter long Deluxe edition bathtub.

With her eyes closed, mouth immersed in water, and whole body relaxed, she started thinking.

————*Right now, it's fine even if I die. I have no more regrets.*

A thought had remained on her mind since she left the Starting City two weeks ago. Clearing this death game was an impossible task, all of the ten thousand people imprisoned would eventually die. It was just a matter sooner or later, so everything in this false virtual world was meaningless. Better yet, rather than continually pressing forward, it would be better to just stop and die.

Looking back at the «strategy meeting» that was held yesterday and today, Asuna became disinterested. She didn't care who the beta testers (which she still didn't know the meaning of) were or how the items were to be distributed. Tomorrow was Sunday, the day they were going to challenge the greatest obstacle, the floor which had swallowed two thousand people, Aincrad's first floor. Such a thing, relying on only forty experienced people, should not be possible, and there was a high chance of annihilation, so defeat was inevitable.

Asuna let go of her normal behaviour, allowing the bath to soak it all up. Because of the «Let's do it once before I die» feeling, now that this desire has come true, even if she disappeared in the boss battle tomorrow, she would have no regrets.....

————*That, cream covered black bread.*

————*Before death, I want to eat it once more.*

This desire that rose in her chest, made Asuna confused again. She opened her eyes, and moved her body in the hot water.

The taste was indeed pretty good. But it had an outright virtual feel to it. The appearance was of polygons. The taste signals were also preset. For that matter, this bath was the same. What appeared to be hot water, was no more than a boundary made of mathematical formula which set its transmittance and reflectance. The surrounding temperature enveloping the body were also merely electronic signals emitted from the Nerve Gear.

But....., but.

One month ago when she lived in the real world, did she have such a strong appetite? Did the past her also have a strong urge to take baths?

Clearly not wanting to eat, yet putting the course menu made of organic ingredients to her mouth mechanically in front of her parents, compared to the virtual cream bread that made her salivate, which one should be considered «Real».....?

The current Asuna, thinking of this matter which she considered very important, inhaled deeply.

* * *

I didn't know trying hard not to look at the door to the bathroom required such a high Will saving throw.

As my body sank deep into the sofa, I exerted all my mental energy to continue to look at «Argo's strategy guide: First Floor Boss edition» which I obtained today. However, despite reading the words written in a simple font a few times, the content in it didn't reach my brain.

——*Well, at least, this proves we are not in the real world.*

If, for example, by some chance, this was in my home in Kawagoe, Saitama Prefecture, with my mother and sister away, but there is a female classmate in the bathroom of my house. What would I do if that happens? Of course, I would exit the room quietly. Then ride my beloved MTB on the prefectural road no.51 towards Arawaka at full speed.

Fortunately, this is the second floor of a two story building in the outskirts of Tolbana on the first floor of the floating castle Aincrad, and I'm not a high school student who is a net game maniac, but the one-handed swordsman Kirito. As an avatar in a virtual world, nothing would happen even if I saw the female fencer Asuna walk out of the bathroom. No, this might be an elaborate trap. If I went into the bathroom, she might check out my room, and then everything in my chests would disappear. However, the built in chest in the room only held low level monster drops, and I have no reason to go to the bathroom. I'll wait for her to come out, then say "Let's work hard tomorrow" and send her back. That's all.

As I repeatedly nodded, while putting the guidebook on the low table, at that moment,

The door —— not the bathroom one, the one leading to the corridor outside —— made a tap, tap-tap-tap noise.

The sound of knocking. But the one who knocked was not the landlady. This rhythm was a signal that had been agreed between me and a certain person.

Surprised, I trembled while getting up, and fearfully turned around, facing the thick oak door —— standing on the other side, should be Argo the rat.

Part 13

Quickly escaping out of the southern window to the front yard, jumping onto a donkey that was tied to the stable, and going straight down the path in the forest in order to reach the labyrinth zone.

This choice suddenly popped up without me thinking. But, managing to ride an animal skill «mount» is not extremely difficult in SAO. If you practiced riding the horse, then you could become progressively skilled. Although I've heard of this, I did not have any excess skill slots to put in this interest at the moment.

Therefore, I got off the sofa and quickly stood up. I took a glance at the bathroom to check the situation. Currently, on the other side of the door, the rapier user Asuna-san must be praising the bath. If Argo found out, she would grab her notebook and add «Kirito is the

type of man who would pull a woman he met for the first time into his room» to it. If this information was distributed, my reputation as a solo player would be completely ruined.

Fortunately —— It could be said that all the doors in this world were perfectly soundproofed. As far as I know, the only three sounds that could be transmitted past the door were ① A loud call «shout», ② knocks, ③ the sound of combat. For sounds like normal speech and the water in the bath, you would not be able to hear it even if you pressed your ear against the door.

Therefore, even if I let her in, she should not notice that the bathroom was occupied by Asuna. If, when Argo comes in, the rapier user walks out —— I will immediately jump out of the window, and leave on a donkey.

After completely fighting with my thoughts speedily, I reached the door, and resolutely opened it. Once I saw the face of the person opposite, I called,

"How rare, for you to visit my room."

The phrase I had prepared in my mind earlier exited my mouth. Information seller «Argo the Rat», her trademark whiskers on her face twitched in a manner showing suspicion, but she immediately shrugged and replied,

"Yes. The client wants to hear your reply today."

Just like that, Argo walked into the room nonchalantly and sat down on the sofa I had just left. I seriously endured looking at the bathroom, and walked to the wagon in a corner of the room, picked up the jar of fresh milk and poured out two cups, and brought it

toward the sofa set, placing it on the low table. The «Rat» raised an eyebrow, then laughed.

"Ki-bou sure is considerate. By any chance, did you put some sleeping drugs in it?"

".....That kind of thing would break the principles of most players, right? Besides, I cannot do anything while you are asleep within the town boundary anyway."

Hearing me say this, Argo clapped her hands and said "That's true.", nodding. Lifting the glass cup, she drained the contents in one gulp.

"Thanks for the meal. This unlimited drink sure has a good taste. Why don't you bottle it up to sell to other players?"

"Unfortunately, after removing it from the farmhouse it will only last five minutes, and the remaining liquid becomes a gunky mess instead of disappearing..."

"Ho, I didn't know that. Looks like there's nothing scarier than free things."

.....As she was talking, my heart was saying, *"Hurry up and get to the point". If she finds out this room's secret I won't know what to do.* I put on an innocent expression, picked up «Argo's strategy guide: First Floor Boss edition», and lightly knocked it.

"Speaking of free, reminds me of this, this. I'm always troubling you, but I've always used five hundred coll to buy these..... and at yesterday's meeting, I heard the axe user Egil say, these books are distributed free of charge? "

Hearing my slightly resentful tone, the rat laughed with a "nishishi".

"This, the one I sold to Ki-bou and all the other front runners is the published first edition. The second edition is distributed for free. But don't worry, only the published version has Argo-sama's autograph."

".....I see, then in the future I won't buy it."

——*This means, the free version, was Argo's own method of taking responsibility as a beta tester*. Although I wanted to hear more about that, but the word **beta** would never escape our lips as it was was taboo between us. No, as I did not contribute earlier as a tester, I have no right to raise the subject.

The atmosphere became heavy, Argo swung her golden brown curly hair and switched the topic.

"Well, I guess it's time to get to the main topic"

Go ahead-go ahead-go ahead! Screaming that in silence, I nodded gently.

"Maa, This time the client is feeling lucky and thoughtful, the subject is Ki-bou's sword.....If you want to sell it today, the client will buy it for thirty nine thousand and eight hundred coll."

".....Th....."

Three nine eight? I almost yelled out. After taking a breath, and considering a few seconds, I opened my mouth,

".....I do not say this to insult you....., but, isn't that a scam or something? The sword is by no means worth forty thousand coll. After all, the market price of an original «Anneal Blade» should be around fifteen thousand coll, right? Adding another twenty thousand coll to that,you can basically buy the materials and

enhance +6 to it safely. Although it might take some time, thirty five thousand can be used to make a sword similar to mine."

"I too, have already told the client that thrice"

Argo's face, covered by hands spread open, had a rare "I don't understand" expression on it.

I crossed my arms and, with the sofa at my back, the troubling matters surrounding the bathroom et cetera all left my mind for a moment. In this matter, I'm absolutely against reducing my money. But, leaving the question alone felt more disgusting. I had decided, so I faced Aincrad's best information provider.

".....Argo, I want to know the name of your client for one thousand five hundred coll. Has the price increased, or do you need to check with the client?"

".....I understand."

The rat nodded, opened her window, and typed at a very high speed before sending the instant message.

After a minute, a side of her eyebrows twitched reflexively as she read the reply, then she shrugged.

"I don't mind."

"....."

I no longer cared, opening my window in that mental state, and one thousand five hundred coll materialized. I put the six coins that represented it in front of Argo.

Pinching them casually with her fingertips, the rat put the coins one by one into her own inventory playfully. “Indeed”, she said while nodding.

“.....Ki-bou, you already know his name. It’s the guy that stood forward during the havoc at the meeting yesterday”

“.....Could it be..... Kibaou? “

Hearing my whisper, the mouse nodded.

——Kibaou. The person who started hostilities against beta testers in that meeting. That guy, wants to buy my sword with forty thousand coll?

Indeed, that guy had a weapon similar to mine on his back, also using the «One-Handed Longsword». But yesterday should be the first time we met. However, Argo said the deal was initially offered a week ago.....

Using fifteen hundred coll to find out his identity, merely made me more confused. Argo, on the sofa, faced me while I was thinking hard, and reminded,

“.....This time, the deal with the sword seems to be off?”

“Emm.....”

Of course, I didn’t want to sell my beloved sword regardless of the price in the first place. I half nodded, and the rat quietly stood up.

“Well then, excuse me for bothering you. I hope that strategy guide will be useful to you.”

“Emm.....”

"Before I leave, I'd like to borrow the next room. I want to equip my night clothes."

"Emm....."

——*Considering that, in yesterday's meeting, I had the feeling that Kibaou was inspecting everyone, and his eyes had lingered on me for a moment. So, his gaze yesterday was not to because he doubted I was a beta tester, but to look at my sword.....maybe? No, maybe both.....*

——*Wait a minute. What did Argo just say?*

Thinking about Kibaou had completely taken eighty percent my mind, I looked up blankly.

In the corner of my eyes, I saw Argo turning the doorknob. And it was neither the door leading to the corridor outside, nor the door in the east, my bedroom —— hanging from the door was a plate depicting the bathroom.

I watched stunned in from the corner of my eyes, as the rat's petite figure slipped into the bathroom and disappeared.

Three seconds later——

"Woaa!?"

A surprised voice,

".....Kyaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

An ear splitting scream that shook the entire room. Subsequently, flying out from that room, was not the player named Argo.

I have no memory of what happened after that.

Part 14

Fourth December, Sunday, 10 a.m.

This Death Game started at one o'clock in the afternoon on a Sunday, on the sixth of November. In three hours, it would be exactly four weeks since it started.

The first time I discovered the Logout button missing, I thought it was the fault of the system, and thought that if I waited long enough, I would be able to log out. Then, the faceless GM Kayaba Akihiko revealed the conditions in order to log out, which was to clear all hundred floors of Aincrad. I had expected that we would be imprisoned for roughly a hundred days, based on the calculation that we could clear an average of a floor per day.

But until now —— It has been four weeks since then, and we haven't even reached the second floor.

I could only laugh at myself for being too naive, but based on today's assault against the boss, we could estimate the time until our release. Forty-four players were now gathered at the Fountain Square in Tolbana. It could be considered to be the strongest fighting force we could have hoped for at this point. If by some chance, this raid party was wiped out, no, even with its partial destruction, rumor would quickly spread to the Starting City. The resignation that «SAO is impossible to clear» would spread throughout the first floor. Reorganizing a second force would take an impossibly long time —— or, it might be impossible to face the boss a second time. Even if we wanted to increase our level in order to challenge the boss again, we had already reached the upper limit

of efficiency to gain experience from the monsters of the the first floor.

Everything depended on whether the Boss Monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord»'s strength had changed from the Beta Test version. The Kobold King in my memories could easily be defeated by this number of people, with their skill, level and equipment, with zero deaths. After that would be, as the circumstances involves our lives, can we remain calm until the end.....

While thinking until my brain overheated, I suddenly noticed the player beside me, who took a short breath, and gave a bitter smile.

Rapier user «Asuna», her profile hidden by her hood, looked exactly like when I first met her at the labyrinth area yesterday morning. Fleeting as a shooting star and as sharp as steel. Compared to her, I looked extremely restless.

As I continued to look at her, she suddenly turned and glared at me.

".....What are you looking at?"

This faint, but forceful whisper, caused me to shake my head. The reason for her bad mood since morning was, according to her, drinking a bucket of spoilt milk which was offered to her, but I couldn't recall it on my own.

"N-nothing"

I immediately answered without thinking, Asuna was once again eyeing me as sharply as the tip of her rapier, before she turned her back to me. I wonder if today's strategy will be all right, then again the two of us were in a party together, merely because we were the extras, and while I was thinking such things——

"Hey."

A voice that could not be considered friendly came from behind, so I turned around to face it.

Standing there, was a player with some kind of pointed, cactus styled, short brown hair. I could not help but recoil. Today, despite being the day many players gathered, his was the one face I wanted to see the least —— It was Kibaou.

In front of the stunned me, Kibaou leered at me dangerously while he stood on lower ground, and said in a low voice,

"Listen here, today you should stay in the back. You guys are merely here as support."

"....."

I may not be a smooth person, but knew that I should not react to him here. Just yesterday, I had rejected his forty thousand coll offer, which was a lot of money. In addition, he had attempted to hide his name, so this situation was quite awkward to anyone with common sense. If the situation was reversed, I would not want to approach him within a twenty meter radius.

Even so, Kibaou's attitude was so unpleasant that it withered my intention to say "of course". Those loathsome distorted cheeks protruded forward, then he spat.

"Be obedient, you guys can take on the small fry kobold mob that slips past my party as your enemy."

Kibaou spat out some more virtual spit onto the ground for emphasis, before turning around and leaving. I watched his back as he returned to the other members of the Group E party. I continued

to look stunned as usual, but was taken aback by a voice from right beside me.

".....What, was that?"

Of course, the «you guys» that was mentioned also included Asuna. To me, her look gave off about 30 percent more terror than the leer just now.

"W-well ..... Maybe he wants Solo players to not be so cocky....."

I spoke without thinking too deeply, but suddenly a thought came, and I said to myself.

——Alternately, don't get too cocky, original beta testers, perhaps.

If that was true, then based on his attitude, Kibaou had already determined that I was a beta tester. But —— what is the basis of this accusation? Even Argo the Rat would not sell any information on whether another player was an original tester. And up until now, I have never ever mentioned the word Beta to anyone.

Once again being tormented by that unpleasant feeling similar to yesterday's, I kept my eyes on Kibaou's back.

".....Eeh.....?"

Then, I noticed something, which made me leak out a sound.

Yesterday, that man offered me forty thousand coll, a large amount of money, to buy my Anneal Blade +6. This is a fact. Of course, it was intended for use in this boss battle today. Enhanced by three extra points in «Durability», which increased the weight of the sword. Leaving aside the matter of how he could suddenly be able to wave such a heavy sword all of a sudden, he obviously wanted to

get a powerful weapon on the battlefield in order to improve his influence and leadership abilities. This motive was unsurprising.

However, if this is so, then by now, he should have spent his forty thousand coll on upgrading his equipment.

That should be so, but the scale mail Kibaou was wearing, and the one handed sword on his back, were the same ones that he had yesterday. It's not exactly bad, but with forty thousand coll, it should be possible to upgrade it to a more powerful equipment, since there was enough time. In fact, the rapier at the waist of Asuna beside me, on my suggestion yesterday night, was upgraded from her «Iron rapier» which was bought from the shop to «Wind fleuret +4» which she had got as a drop. After all, today we may all die, so what's the point of keeping forty thousand coll.....

——But, my thoughts only reached this point.

Before I had realized it, the green haired knight Diabel stood in front of at the edge of the fountain, raising the familiar beautiful voice of his and said,

"Everyone, although it may be sudden —— Thank you all, I am really grateful that all forty-four of the party members have gathered, without a single missing person."

After talking, a loud cheer of *OH* shook up the entire square. It was followed by a waterfall-like applause. I stopped guessing and raised my hands to clap.

After smiling at everyone, the knight pumped his right fist, and continued shouting loudly,

"Now I will say, I was actually thinking of aborting this mission if a single person didn't turn up! But..... this kind of worry, is an insult to everyone. I'm very happy that..... the best raid party..... well, even if the number of people is not enough!"

A few people laughed and whistled, and some people pumped their right hands mimicking to him.

I did not want to find fault with Diabel's leadership. But, from my point of view, there was too much excitement. Excessive tension could lead to a fear-like poison, but over-excitement could also have bad effects, like being careless. During the beta testing period, being defeated for being over enthusiastic was like a joke, but here, failure could lead to the death of a player. In this situation, it would be a good thing for the players to be less excessively excited.

While I thought about these things, I looked at the other groups from behind. Group B's leader Egil, the two-handed axe wielder and several other people, all had stern expressions and their arms folded in front of them. At critical moments, they would be reliable. Kibaou of group E had his back to me, so I couldn't read his expression.

As everyone yelled about, Diabel raised both hands to suppress the cheering.

"Everyone..... What I want to say now is this!"

His right hand moved to his left hip, and he pulled out his silvery sword with a loud sound——

".....Let's win!!"

A loud cry rang out, It reminded me of four weeks ago, in the central square of the Starting City, when ten thousand players screamed.

Part 15

The large group of people walked from the town of Tolbana to the labyrinth tower, and this scene seemed to trigger something in Asuna's memories. After a few minutes of thinking, she finally recalled it.

It was the school trip that she had went for in January this year. The destination was Queensland, Australia. The tension of the students who moved from Tokyo in mid winter to the Gold Coast at the height of summer was through the roof, it was like a festival no matter where she went.

Just about everything in this situation was similar to the point there was almost no difference, the atmosphere of walking under the foliage with forty or so people, was similar to walking alongside her classmates at that time. The endless chatting and frequent outbursts of laughter. The only difference was, monsters occasionally attacked them from the forest. However, all the monsters that came close were instantly slain by the skills that everyone were boasting about.

Asuna, bringing up the rear alongside a swordsman, forgot all about last night's incident and began talking.

".....Hey, you, before coming here, did you play other M..... MMO games? Is that what it is called?"

“Emm..... ah, yes, yes it is.”

The swordsman still looked quite timid, as his black hair swayed up and down.

“In other games, are there normally times with this kind of feeling? How should I put it..... like going on a field trip.....”

“.....Ha ha, a field trip would be nice”

Giving a short laugh, the swordsman then shrugged.

“Unfortunately, the other games that I play don’t have this kind of feeling. After all, those are games that don’t use the FullDive technology, so we need to use the mouse and keyboard in order to control the avatar’s movements, so there is not a lot of time to check the chat window.”

“...Ah, I see.....”

“Well, there are other games that include voice chat, but I’ve yet to play those games.”

“Hmm.”

As a silent dash game character continued on the the monitor’s screen in her imagination, Asuna said softly,

“.....The real things, how does it feel?”

“Eh? Re-real things?”

The swordsman gave a questioning look, so Asuna tried to describe the image in her mind.

“Like I said..... this kind of fantasy world... being in a group with swordsmen and magicians, on our way to fight the terrible chief of

monsters. Along the way, what would we talk about..... or would they walk along silently. This kind of topic."

"....."

The swordsman remained oddly silent, and when she glanced at him looking like this, Asuna felt conscious that she had asked a childish question. Just as she reflexively turned away, and was about to say "I guess it doesn't matter,"

"Walking on the road leading either to death or glory, huh."

The quiet words reached her right ear.

"If we were compared to people living a normal life... probably, it would be like going to a restaurant for dinner. If there is something to talk about I will talk, otherwise I will keep quiet. I think this boss raid will eventually turn out like that. If possible, I hope we can challenge the boss daily."

"..... hu hu, hu"

The swordsman's straightforward words were funny to Asuna, who gave off a small laugh. She explained immediately, almost as an excuse.

"I'm sorry for laughing, but..... this is really strange. This world is an ultimate form of non-daily life, but you want this activity to be our daily routine."

"Ha ha..... I guess that's true."

The swordsman laughed in the same way, then quietly said,

"However, it took four weeks to reach this point. Even if we beat the boss today, we still have another ninety-nine floors to go. I'm.....

prepared to go for two, no, three years like this. If it goes on like this, even this non-daily event would become daily."

Those words would have caused great shock and despair to the old Asuna. But now, she realized that it was just like dry wind blowing out of her chest.

".....How strong. If it were me, I can't think like that. Thinking about living in this world for years..... dying in today's battle would be less scary to me."

The swordsman glanced at her for a moment after listening to her, then put his hands in his grey jacket pocket, and said in a subdued voice,

"If we can reach the higher floors, maybe there is an even better bath there."

".....Re-really?"

She involuntarily responded, then realized what she just said. Feeling ashamed, she said in a low voice,

".....Remember this. Or you'll really end up drinking a barrel of spoiled milk."

"Then, the least we can do is to come back alive today."

After making that comment, the swordsman grinned and laughed.

* * *

11.00 a.m, we moved to the labyrinth.

12.30 p.m, we walked to the top floor.

So far, there were no deaths. I secretly pat myself on the chest. After all, a near forty-eight people «Full Raid» party marched, and for a majority of the people here this was their first experience. In this world, «First» was an action that had the risk of an accident and was dangerous, with no exceptions.

In fact, there were three situations which were really scary. The people wielding long weapons such as «Spear» and «Halberd», mostly in the Group F and G, were ambushed by the melee type Kobolds along the road. In SAO, melee weapons will not harm players if they are swung by accident (of course, this is not equal to a criminal act), and sword skills that come into contact with an obstacle are also stopped. Ranged weapons were already at high risk from this, and the melee ambush made the situation even worse.

In such a situation, the knight Diabel showed his ability to command precisely. As a leader of the forces, he made bold decisions, like staying to fight while getting others to retreat, using heavy amounts of sword skills to knock back the monsters, and switching between long and melee weapon equipped members. These decisions could only be made if he was familiar with being a leader.

Because of these things, before departing as a solo player I had said "It's not too exciting" and was concerned about looking too arrogant. Diabel had his own philosophy about his leadership, *trusting him fully is every raid member's duty* was the reason everyone reached this point.

——After recognizing this, two huge doors stood in front of our eyes, and those in the rear had to stand on tiptoe to look up at them.

On the surface of the grey stone, was a relief of a terrifying beast-headed monster. Speaking of Kobolds, in most other MMO games these mobs were usually the weakest of the weak, but in SAO this «Demi-Human» class of humanoid beings were formidable foes. It had the ability to wield weapons such as swords and axes, and could even use sword skills. Compared to a normal attack, it had much higher speed, power, and even had hit correction properties. If a player was caught in a defenseless position, even its elementary skill could cause a critical hit, and reduce the HP gauge drastically. The rapier user Asuna beside me, reached the deepest part of the labyrinth using only «Linear», which proved the strength and horror of sword skills...

".....Can you listen for a while?"

I moved closer to Asuna, and whispered.

"Today, our opponents are the «Ruin Kobold Sentinels», and even though they are not the boss, they are still strong enemies that spawn around it. I mentioned yesterday that a large portion of their head and body is covered and protected by metal armor, your «Linear» will not be enough."

After listening, her gaze sharp under the hood, the fencer nodded.

"I understand. Just aim for the throat, right."

"Exactly. Just like they did after using «Pole Axe»'s sword skills, we must immediately switch positions after I attack them to leave them open."

Nod, Asuna nodded before facing the gigantic doors, and I continued to look at her for a few more seconds.

Where and how you die, early or late is the only difference.

When we first met, she had told me that. I obviously couldn't let those words come true. Asuna's «Linear» demonstrated talent that she herself was not aware of. Of all the shooting stars, hers was one that did not burn up in the atmosphere, withstanding the flames until it hit the ground.

If she can survive today's battle, Asuna would most definitely be known as one of the fastest and most beautiful swordsmen in Aincrad. She will definitely be an illuminating shooting star, brightly guiding other players who are in fear and despair. I'm very convinced of this point. This responsibility, is a role an original beta tester like me could never perform due to the stigma involved.

Once I confirmed my determination and swallowed, I faced the large door. In front of us, Diabel had finished preparing the lineup of the seven parties.

None of the knight dared to shout "Let's win!" in this place. This was because humanoid monsters would react to loud noises here.

Instead, Diabel lifted his silver long sword up high, and gave a large nod. The forty-three raid members also raised their weapons and nodded in reply.

His green long hair fluttered as he turned around, the knight placed his left hand in the middle of the large doors——

"————Let's go!"

With a short cry, he pushed the doors open with all his might.

Part 16

Was it this wide?

Looking at the boss room of the first floor for the first time in around four months, this was the first impression that I had.

The room was very deep. Its width from the left to the right wall was about twenty meters. Plus it was quite rectangular. There was a distance of about one hundred meters from the entrance to the back. The size of floor was roughly the same as the other 20 floors, and the room was the last one to be mapped. Therefore, its area could be estimated from the blank area on the map. However, seeing it with our eyes made it feel deeper than it actually was.

This room was spacious in order to contain the gigantic monsters here.

In Aincrad's boss room, the doors would not close even during battle against the boss. Therefore, even if the events took a turn for the worse and we were in danger of being annihilated, we had the option to retreat. However, if we turned and fled and the enemy's long ranged sword skill hit us, it might slow us down, «delay», or prevent us from moving, «stun». So, we would have to retreat while facing the boss, but in that situation, the critical hundred meters needed to escape would feel infinitely long. Instantaneous teleportation was possible using «Teleport Crystal», however it was expensive and obtainable only in the higher floors, which would make retreating from bosses on higher floors easier, but because it was so expensive, after the retreat, the player could be left with a near-empty wallet.

While I was contemplating such thoughts, the boss room sank into almost complete darkness. On the walls to the left and right of the room, *ping* *ping*, from the front of the room to its back, «torches» were lit one by one. The crude torches noisily blazed.

With the sources of light generated, the «Gamma» also increased. The stone floor and walls were filled with cracks. Large and small skulls were variously placed to decorate the place. In the deepest part of the room stood a huge throne, and a rough silhouette of something large sat on it.

The knight, Diabel, raised his long sword, and swung it down in front of him...

At his signal, the forty-four members of the boss monster hunting forces raised a battle cry while rushing into the room like an avalanche.

* * *

The front row rushed in first, led by Group A's leader equipped with an iron heater shield, with his «Hammer» lifted up high. They were followed by Group B to its left, led by the Axe warrior Egil, and to its right, Diabel and his five friends' Group C. Group D's leader was a tall man wielding a Two-handed Long Sword, and behind these three, were Group E led by Kibaou, the long stick «Polearm» equipped Group F and Group G, running in parallel.

And even further behind them, were two extra people——

When the distance between Group A and the throne was about 20 meters, the gigantic silhouette which had not moved initially suddenly jumped. In the air, it spun around once, before landing on

the ground, causing the earth to rumble. After that, it opened its wolf-like jaws, and howled.

“Gururuaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

The demi-human King, «Illfang the Kobold Lord», looked exactly as I remembered. Its muscular body over two meters tall, covered in blue-gray fur. Its bloodthirsty eyes flashed a golden red. Its right hand wielded an axe made of bone, while its left had a Leather Buckler equipped. Behind its waist, a meter and half long «Talwar» stuck out.

The Kobold Lord raised the Bone Axe in its right hand up high, and struck it forcefully at Group A’s leader. The heater shield received the blow, causing a dazzling light effect and a loud sound to reverberate within the hall.

As if that sound was a signal, out of various holes located high up on the side walls, three heavily armed monsters jumped down. These were the guards, «Ruin Kobold Sentinel». Group E led by Kibaou, and the supporting Group G, quickly moved towards the three, locking onto their target. Asuna and I looked at each other and dashed to the nearest Sentinel.

Just like this, on the fourth of December at 2.40p.m, the first boss battle finally started.

«Illfang»‘s HP gauge had four bars. During the first three bars, it would hold its Bone Axe in its right hand and its Leather Buckler in its left, but on the fourth, it would discard them and remove the Talwar off its waist. Its attack patterns would change completely, was what Argo’s strategy guide had described. After its weapons changed from the Bone Axe to the Talwar, our sword skills and

tactics had to change accordingly, just as we had discussed in the meeting yesterday.

While I fought against the «Sentinel» that slipped through Group E and Group G, I looked out of the corner of my eyes at the front line, there was no sign of the line or tactics collapsing. The «Tank» forces and the «Attacker» forces calmly switched places for 'pot' rotation. The left edge of my sight displayed a small window of raid party's average HP gauge, and it remained stable above 80 percent for all the parties.

I'll leave it up to them, just like that ——, and just like that the battle went on.

It's not like that when playing solo, but now I prayed with all my strength for their success.

* * *

Being able to rescue her from the labyrinth tower, while she had fainted (although she didn't understand how it happened), she thought the black-haired swordsman should be quite an influential person.

However, after seeing his way of fighting, Asuna could tell that her assessment fell short.

——*Strong.*

No, the word strong was not enough to describe the feeling while he was in battle. His power and speed felt as though it was beyond existing scales, and it felt like he was in «Another dimension».

To Asuna, a beginner who has never played a net game or been in a FullDive environment before, she had difficulty putting the feeling that she had into words. If she tried to express it, it was a feeling that everything was optimized. All of his actions did not have excess movements, hence he had a fast technique, and with his heavy sword he dealt deadly damage. The heavily armed Kobold's long axe attack was repelled upwards into the sky by his upward slash. "Switch," he called out as he retreated casually. In his place, Asuna quickly jumped in front of the Kobold, and while the Kobold was bent over in recoil, she easily used «Linear» on its unprotected neck.

Asuna recalled the words that he had said the first time they met. 『Overkill has no demerit or penalty from the system, but it's bad for efficiency』, and she had answered with『Is there any problem with it?』. At this moment, there would be a large problem with it. If you could remove excess action, the action became easier and thus the vision was broader. The «Sentinel» was much stronger compared to the «Trooper» she was fighting at that time, yet Asuna could see every move it made very clearly.

The vital part of the throat that Asuna launched «Linear» on caused the Kobold's HP gauge to be reduced to a sliver. If it was the old Asuna, she would have waited to counterattack with another «Linear», but that was useless «Overkill». After the delay from the sword skill was over, Asuna poked the throat once again without excess movements, and the Kobold's HP gauge became empty as it burst into blue fragments and scattered away.

"GJ"

Behind her, the black haired swordsman said softly. Even though she did not know what it stood for, she replied with "You too!"

At that time, the first bar of boss' HP gauge had disappeared. Diabel in the front row shouted "We're on the second bar!", as a few more «Sentinels» jumped out of the holes in the wall.

Forgetting that they were extra forces, Asuna and her nearby partner dashed at the monsters. The sword in her right hand, despite being used only starting yesterday, had already been assimilated into her palms and felt familiar. She felt that the response from the sword was clear when she fired off her techniques. Like leather wrapped around her hand, even the tip of her sparkling and sharp blade felt like a part of her arm.

—— *If this is the feeling of «to fight», up till yesterday everything felt like a fake imitation.*

——*Surely, there will still be many battles «Ahead» of us. Dashing forward in a straight line beside this swordsman. In this illusory world, despite every conduct being fake... but... but surely, this feeling is true. I want to see what is before his eyes.*

The monster's axe swung down, and the swordsman countered with a high blow. At the next instant, Asuna shouted "Switch" and jumped toward the enemy with her beloved sword.

Part 17

The battle between the Kobold king with its guards and the forty-four players moved faster than I had expected.

Diabel and the rest of Group C had reduced the first HP gauge, Group D had removed the second layer, and now Group F and G

had reduced its third layer by half. Until this point, Group A and B, the «Tank» teams, had their HP in the yellow «Half» region, but never entered the dangerous red region. There were also a few guards, which were left to Group E and the two of us to handle, we had performed so well that sometime in the midst of battle, Group G moved to support the main battlefield.

The rapier user Asuna fighting bravely was impressive, and the «Linear» that had amazed me when we first met, with the stronger and sharper rapier, accurately pierced the Kobold guards' throats, their weak point. The time from the first motion of the skill until the damage occurred was just half that of the System Assist's on its own. Even I, who had been practicing deliberately boosting the sword skill since the beta testing period, was not confident that I could achieve those speeds.

She was just a beginner with only one skill. With increased knowledge and honed senses, just imagining what she would become made my spine tingle.

If this comes true, I'd like to see her progress by her side—— Was the thought that came to my mind, but I forced it back into my chest. One month ago I had decided to be a selfish solo player, so I have no right to be together with other players. My first friend in this world was Cline, who should still be around the city we started in, carefully and safely levelling his friends.....

As I recalled those unpleasant memories, in front of my eyes, Asuna had already struck down her second prey. Because the «Ruin Kobold Sentinel» only spawned here, it was considered a rare monster. Although it did not give as much experience and coll as the boss, it still dropped an item. Only money was automatically

distributed evenly in a raid, while the experience was split between those who defeated it, which were Asuna and me. The item drop had a higher probability of going to Asuna because her attack was the fatal strike.

So, this was the reason Group E's leader Kibaou, whose party was fighting similar Sentinels, gave that warning earlier. However, Asuna and I working together defeated our target much faster than the full six-member party of Group E. This way, even he couldn't complain——

While I was considering this, from the back came Kibaou's voice.

"I know what you're up to. Feels gooood."

".....What did you say?"

Not knowing what he meant, I turned around to ask that. As it was just before the third wave of three Sentinels spawn, and just after the other two had been defeated, this was an opportunity to talk. The cactus headed one-handed sword user frowned at me, raised his voice and spat,

"Don't pretend. I already know your motivations for slipping into this boss raid."

"My..... motivations? Aside from beating the boss, is there anything else?"

"What, I can be direct, right? It's exactly what you're aiming for!"

This conversation, seemed to be a lot of guesswork on his part. I was so frustrated I grinded my teeth, before Kibaou finally said what he wanted to say...

“I’ve heard it before. **In the past, you did a dishonourable act such as LA the boss.** “

“Wha.....”

————LA. It meant the final hit «Last Attack».

It was true that I, in past battles against bosses, had a good grasp of the boss’ HP gauge in order to determine the best time to use my strongest sword skills. However, that was not in this world, but in another floating castle that existed for merely a single month —— in the «Sword Art Online closed beta test».

Kibaou not only knew I was a beta tester, but knew my behaviour from back then. Wait a minute. This man just said “I heard it”. In other words, it was based on hearsay. But, who did he hear it from.....

At that time, as I gave it my second thought, my body felt like it was jolted by electricity.

Last week, Kibaou used the information provider Argo the Rat to attempt to buy my «Anneal Blade +6». Yesterday, he attempted to use forty thousand coll to buy it. Even though I rejected his offer, he did not spend that money.

No. It was not that he did not spend it. In fact, he didn’t have that kind of money in the first place.

It was not just Argo, Kibaou was also a mediator. The person who had forty thousand coll was not him. If another person was put between that person and Argo, no matter how much I paid, I could not have found out who the original buyer was.

That mastermind, gave Kibaou the information on the original beta tester and stirred up trouble. If it is like this, that guy's aim was not to get «Anneal Blade +6» for battle. No, improving his battle force may still be a part of it, but he might have a larger goal in mind. To weaken me. With my attack weakened, it would interfere with my techniques, preventing me from getting the LA bonus on the boss ——

".....Kibaou. That guy who talked to you, how did he manage to gain information on me being a beta tester?"

"Of course. He used ridiculously large amounts of money, and bought information from «the Rat». I joined the team to keep the hyena in check."

————*Liar. Argo, even if she would sell information on herself, would never sell information on other beta testers.*

As I clenched my teeth, the front row gave a loud cheer. The boss's long HP gauge had finally reached the fourth and final layer.

My attention was drawn to the front lines. It looks like the third HP gauge was removed by the pole weapons of Group F and G before they retreated. Instead of waiting for their full recovery, Group C rushed in to press the attack. The party leader was the commander of the raid itself, the blue haired knight Diabel. Even in the dim light of the dungeon, his blue hair glittered brilliantly.

"Uguruooooooooooo————!!"

«Illfang the Kobold Lord» gave out a loud roar. At the same time, the final wave of three «Ruin Kobold Sentinel» jumped out of holes in the walls.

“Another small fry Kob, this time I won’t let even one go. I won’t let you LA them.”

His voice dripping with hatred, Kibaou returned to the midst of Group E.

While still not recovered from the unexpected shock and confusion, I had no choice but to turn away, and went to regroup with Asuna who was not far away.

“.....What did you talk about?”

As she asked quietly, I just shook my head.

“No..... —— first, let’s defeat our opponents.”

“.....Yes.”

After our brief exchange, I picked up my sword and charged at a Sentinel.

At that moment——

Suddenly, I felt «something», so I quickly gazed at the main battlefield.

The Kobold king, with the bone axe in its right hand and the leather shield in its left, threw both down onto the ground simultaneously, gave another roar, brought its hand to the back of its waist, grasped the rag bound handle and pulled out the «Talwar».

During the beta testing period, I’ve seen this motion pattern change many times. From here on, it would only use the sword skills from the curved blade category, going into the berserk condition, becoming terribly wild, but dealing with it now is easier than before. It used a long-ranged longitudinal cut. As long as you grasped the

timing of the skill when it was launched, even if you're near the boss you could avoid the edge of the weapon.

Under Diabel's command, the six people that formed Group C surrounded the boss. This was a formation that was not used while the boss still wielded the bone axe. Really, I didn't expect that reading the book beforehand allowed them to come up with such a precise and amazing formation. This was really a good decision. As long as the six could avoid the wild swings of the Talwar until the final blow.....

".....U.....?"

From the back of my throat, that noise was subconsciously made.

The player X asking Kibaou to buy my sword for the large sum of forty thousand coll, was to interfere with me performing LA on the Kobold king. I made this guess a while ago. Even though my sword had not been taken, the purpose of X has been achieved. As the raid's extra force, I could only deal with the Sentinels, so I couldn't even approach within ten meters of the boss.

However, if it is like this.

The identity of X, at this moment, is a player who is attempting to LA the boss —— It should be like that right? After all, paying forty thousand gold is too large a sum of money just to hinder me, and being able to LA the boss should be more than enough to cover that expense.

In other words..... the player X manipulating Kibaou, is a person who was with me in the beta test, his name is.....

"——It's coming!"

Asuna sharply said, instantly rousing me out of my thoughts. The Sentinel swung its halberd, and I subconsciously used the diagonally cutting sword skill «Slant», repelling his weapon with all my strength.

"Switch!"

I shouted, then jumped backward, as Asuna went in front of the guard. Once again, I glanced at the battlefield twenty meters to my left.

At the end of that motion in which the boss was invincible, the battle resumed. The first locked target was the blue haired knight, who coolly avoided the first strike.

With his back facing me, I wondered within myself.

——*Is it you?*

——*Diabel the knight, you are..... Is everything part of your plan.....?*

Of course he didn't answer. Illfang roared and howled, then it slowly moved the blade in its right hand up high.....

Once again, my mind felt that «something» sensation.

Uncomfortable. Something is different. The boss monster and the Kobold king that I knew were not the same. It was not its color, nor its size. It was more than the looks and the sound. The source of discomfort, rather than its body..... it was the weapon in its right hand.

From where I was, only the silhouette of the sword was visible..... that blade, isn't it too thin? The gently warped blade was certainly

similar to the one I was familiar with during the beta test period, but its width..... as well as its sparkle, was different. It was not the rough texture of cast iron. It was forged, and its edges had the tint of steel. I have seen a weapon similar to that before..... it was used by a mob on the tenth floor of the old floating castle. Dressed in red armour, it was a very formidable foe during the beta testing period. The weapon could not be used by players, only by those in the monster category.....

"A..... AA.....!"

My throat spasmed and made some noise. I forcefully sucked air into my lungs, and bellowed loudly.

"Thi..... this won't do, fall back!! Retreat quickly————!!"

Unfortunately, my voice was drowned out by the sound effects of Illfang's sword skill.

The Kobold king's huge body shook the floor, as it jumped up high. It turned its body in mid-air, while accumulating power to its weapon. As it fell down, it used the accumulated power, releasing a crimson beam of light.

Plane of attack——horizontal. Angle of attack——three hundred and sixty degrees.

Sword skill for katanas, the heavy ranged attack "whirling wheel" «Tsumujiguruma».

Part 18

Six bright red light effects appeared, like pillars of blood.

The HP gauge that appeared at the left corner showing Group C's average HP on the left immediately dropped below fifty percent and into the yellow zone. Although you could expand the gauge with your fingertips in order to see the six individual HP gauges of each player, at the moment there was no point in doing it. Everyone in Group C obviously received equal amounts of damage.

It was a ranged attack with tremendous power enough to take out more than half of the full HP, and that was not all. Yellow lights rotated around the heads of six people that had collapsed on the floor, indicating that they were unable to move for a period time —— this was the stun effect.

There were a large variety of bad status in SAO, and the worst of it weren't paralysis or blindness. Their effect lasted at most ten seconds. However, once the effect started, there was no way to recover from it. Therefore, if the front members were stunned, their friends must save them by diving in front without waiting for the switch, and must become the target to draw enemy fire ——— however.

Not a single person moved to help. Despite carefully planning for the fight during the meeting, followed by the march forward in a mood under the impression of an easy victory. Also, the person everyone relied on, their leader Diabel, had been struck down in a single blow. For these various reasons, aside from Group C, everyone was bound to the spot rigidly. After the stranded silence,

the Kobold Lord recovered from the long delay caused by using its skill.

As everyone recovered, I gave out a loud shout.

“Chasing.....”

At the same time, in the front lines, the two handed axe user Egil and several of his subordinates moved in to support the others.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

“Uguruo!!”

The demi human roared, and the katana—— no, nodachi in both its hands was lifted off the cut floor and raised up high. Sword skill *Floating Boat*«Ukifune». It was aimed for the Knight that had fell right in front of it, Diabel. As if pulled by a red arc of light, the knight in silver armor was sent flying up high. The damage wasn’t very high. However, the Kobold Lord’s movement didn’t stop there.

Using its large wolf-like mouth, it grinned and laughed ferociously.

The nodachi was once again wrapped in a red light effect. «Ukifune» was merely the start of the combo. If you were hit by this while in the air, it was useless to struggle, you could only defend by curling up. However, it was impossible for a person who was dealing with the situation for the first time.

While in the sky, Diabel brandished his sword, trying to pull off a sword skill to counterattack. However, because he was unstable, the system could not determine the starting motion for the skill. The nodachi directly hit the front of the knight who waved his sword uselessly.

At a speed which could not be seen, an upward attack, continued by a downward one. It was followed up by a thrust. A three hit strike, this skill's name is *Scarlet Fan*, «Hiōgi».

The knight's body was covered in three continuous damage effect, the bright colours and strong sounds showed that all the attacks were critical hits. His *virtual body*«Avatar» was blown twenty meters away, over the heads of the raid members, and ended up near the Sentinel which was my opponent. He fell almost as if piercing the ground. His HP gauge, which was already red, began to reduce further.

"……!!"

I leaked out a strange sound from the back of my throat, from the front, the Sentinel's Long Axe approached, so I put as much force as I could into the «Slant». The Axe's handle was smashed in the middle, and as it stood stunned for a short duration Asuna's rapier found its throat and pierced it.

Not waiting for the monster's shattering effect to happen, I turned towards the body of the fallen Diabel. Seeing the fallen knight at a meter, such a close range for the first time, I felt sparks running up my mind.

——*I recognize this player.*

His face and name were completely different from what I remembered, but we have previously met face to face in the other Aincrad, and maybe I even talked to him. As expected, Diabel was an original beta tester like me. And like me, he fought hard to hide his identity until today. No, as I had made close friends while in hiding, my worry was probably several times his.

However, precisely because he had a tester's knowledge of the first floor, he was harmed by it when it came to the later stages.

Although I do not remember him, he remembered I was called Kirito, and although the appearance of me during beta testing is not the same, he remembered that the name of the player who was good at placing the LA on the boss during the beta testing period, so he tried to confirm my identity earlier on. Subsequently, he believed that I would probably try to do the same thing here. The Floor Boss drops high performance items including «Unique» one-of-a-kind items, and in a death game like SAO, combat ability and viability was the equivalent. In order to survive in this world, Diabel —— instead of being a solo player, chose to be a Knight leading a crowd—— tried to get the rare drops from Illfang by all means.

At the moment I thought that, I considered Diabel on the floor. His eyes, as blue as his hair, twitched, but he immediately emitted a pure light. From his trembling lips, in a voice soft enough for only me to hear, he said.

".....Please, Kirito-san. The boss, defea—"

Before his sentence ended——

The commander of the Aincrad Boss Raid Forces, the Knight Diabel, turned into blue shards of glass which shattered and scattered.

* * *

Uwaaaaa, this kind of cry —— this scream filled the Boss room.

Nearly all the raid members clutched and hung on to their weapons, with their wide eyes open. But no one moved. The leader being first

to fall, to die, was an unpleasant situation no one had prepared for, so no one knew the next course of action.

Of course, this was also true for me.

In my mind, two options alternately blinked. To flee, or to fight.

In normal circumstances, «Boss uses weapons and skills different to information previously given» and «Loss of leader», suffering from two disasters, everyone should immediately retreat out of the boss's room. However, if our backs were exposed to Illfang while we retreated, he could easily use his long ranged Katana Skill, the ten people furthest to the back, in the worst case, would end up stunned and deprived of all HP by a sequence of attacks like Diabel. That is to say, even as we retreat we must defend our bodies, but our opponent was difficult as he had unknown skills. Compared to the time taken to dash out of the room, the same degree of HP decrease leading to deaths could be expected.

Above it all, with too many deaths —— including the leader —— and the boss strategy that was issued failed, it would be difficult to assemble another force to raid the boss again. In other words, all attempts to clear the death game SAO would lead to failure. The eight thousand survivors, would not be warriors of the virtual world, but prisoners trapped in the first floor until there is an some kind of «end».....

At this time, two voices called out at the same time, stirring me from my hesitation.

One was, right at the front lines, the sound of Illfang, who had come out of its delay, raging. Metallic sounds and screams, the damage effects gathered together dimly and violently shook.

The other one, was kneeling by my side, Kibaou's voice.

".....Why..... Why..... Diabel-han, the leader, why the first....."

——*Because he wanted to perform LA on the boss.*

Telling him like this would be easy. However, I didn't say anything.

Now that I think about it, in the first meeting, Kibaou had ate the bait Diabel acted out. Suspecting that there were beta testers in their midst and making remarks about not wanting to work with them unless they apologized. Not only did Diabel not prevent him from speaking, he allowed the topic to be brought up for discussion.

That scene, was not Diabel's «Compensation» to Kibaou. Instead it was a method of communication, as the representative dealing with the sword transaction, they met up in a public place, giving Kibaou the opportunity to test public opinion against Beta testers. Egil's logical argument ended the wrath in the middle, but if the boss raid battle did not end as planned, Kibaou can bring out the same topic again. In other words, Kibaou did not suspect that Diabel was a Beta tester, but was a representative of the novice players opposing testers. He was looking forward to people to trust him. Facing this kind of person, how do I at this time to give him further against it.

Instead—— I grabbed Kibaou's drooping left shoulder and forced it up.

"Is this the time to be discouraged?!"

With a low cry, Kibaou's small eyes were instantly filled with a familiar hostility.

".....What..... What did you say?"

"You're the Group E leader, if you are a coward, your companions will die! Listen here, additional Sentinels may still spawn..... no, they will definitely spawn. Handling them is your responsibility!"

".....then, what do you want to do. Are you planning on escaping alone?"

"How is that possible. Of course I....."

With the Anneal Blade in my right hand making a sound, I said,

"——Will get the LA on the boss!"

Part 19

Being trapped in this world for one month, I had taken many actions to keep myself alive. I didn't dispense the knowledge I obtained during the beta test period to anyone, in order to do quests and use hunting grounds that were more efficient while single-mindedly strengthening myself.

If I had to carry out a solo player's normal code of conduct, in this situation, with many raid members standing between me and the Boss monster, I should run towards the exit. Not turning back even as the raging Kobold king kills my fellow humans, instead actively using them as shields, in order to ensure my own safety.

However, at this time, no such thoughts came to my mind, as a fiery feeling flowed throughout my veins, keeping my legs at the edge of life and death. This may have been because of the words the knight Diabel said to me.

Boss —— Defeat. Those were the words he said. Not escape. In order to significantly boost the probability of obtaining rare items, he had persistently tried to LA, and even though he sacrificed his life in the end, his ability to lead was definitely outstanding. In his last moments, Diabel at his defeat had decided not to ask us to «Withdraw», instead to do «Bloody Battle». So, as a member of the raid party, I will comply with his wish..... no, his dying wish.

However, there was still one hesitation that remained.

Before the battle began, I had secretly decided. Instead of protecting myself, I would protect the rapier user «Asuna»'s life with everything I had. She had a sparkling light of talent which I did not own. For this bud to be scattered before it blooms, is absolutely unacceptable situation for anyone fanscinated by VRMMO games.

Just before I began to run, I looked at Asuna who stood to my left, and wanted to tell her, "Stay in the back, when the front collapses you should immediately withdraw," However, as if she could read my mind, the girl openly said to me before I could open my mouth,

"I'll go too. We're partners after all."

I did not have a good reason to deny her, and there was no time for debate. After hesitating a moment, I nodded.

".....Understood. I'll be relying on you!"

The two of us turned in the same direction at the same time, and ran towards the back of the hall. Along the way we heard uninterrupted roars and screams. Although it seemed that there were no deaths following Diabel's, the average HP of the vanguard was less than half, as having lost its leader, Group C would definitely be down by

twenty percent. Some players were in complete panic, hesitating to escape, if this went on the formation would fall in a few seconds.

The first thing was to calm them out of their panicked state. However, in this situation, the noise drowned out all instructions given. I needed short yet strong words, and being inexperienced in leading I had no idea what words should be used ——.....

At this time, Asuna, running by my side, violently grasped her hood and cape that were in the way, and flung it off her body.

The light from countless torches that were the side walls, seemed to gather together and shine brightly. The glossy chestnut long hair, now emitted a deep golden shine, scattering the dim light in the boss's room.

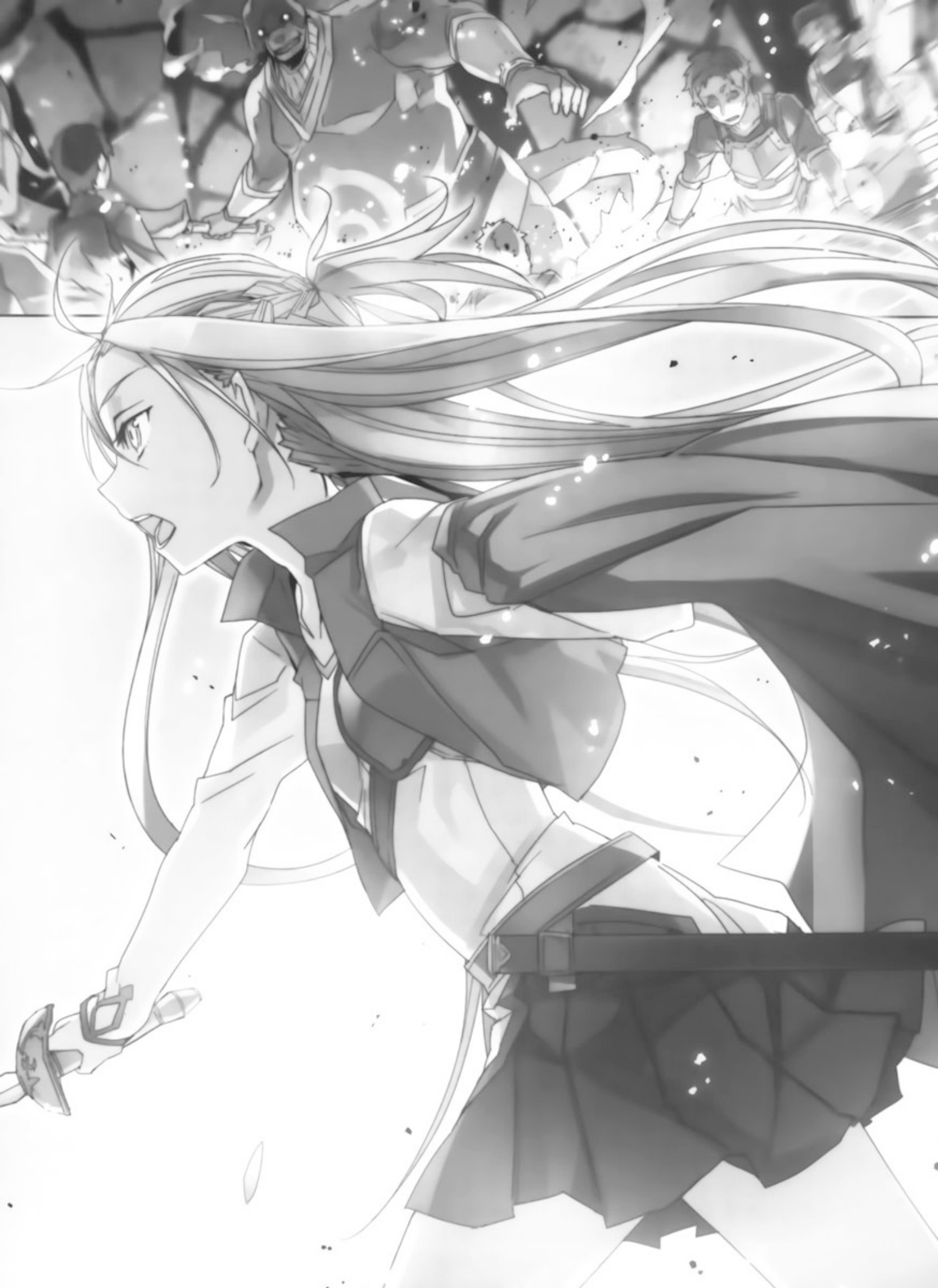
Asuna's long and wildly fluttering long hair, made her look like a shooting star blazing in the current darkness. Even the panicking players became silent with the shine in their eyes. Not letting this miraculous moment of silence go to waste, I called out with the loudest throat ripping voice I could muster,

"Everyone, back ten steps towards the exit! As long as the boss is not surrounded, it will not use its ranged attacks."

By the time the echo of my voice disappeared, time seemed to flow again. *Za!!* As this sound was made, the front line players were by Asuna and my side, moving backwards together. As if to chase us, the Kobold king turned to face us, who were running to meet it.

"Asuna, this battle will be similar to the Sentinel's!..... Move!!"

The moment her name was called, the rapier user glanced at me, then faced the front again almost immediately.



"Understood!"

In front of us, the Kobold king's left hand left the Nodachi that both hands were previously holding, lowering his stance. That motion, was ——

"……!!"

I held my breath, and started to use my own sword skill. I moved my right hand to my left hip as well, leaning forward as if to fall. At this angle, my motion was insufficient in order for the system to recognize it. From such a low position close to the floor, I stomped my right foot to take off. As my body was wrapped in a thin blue light, I ran through the ten meters separating the boss from me. Basic sword rush technique, «Rage Spike».

At the same time, the boss was poised with a Nodachi glowing a green flash, and slashed at a speed which could not be seen. Straight long ranged move, *Whirlwind* «Tsujikaze». Because it was an Iai type move, it would be impossible to keep up with it after seeing it launched.

"U…… ooo!!"

With a roar, the trajectory of my sword came from the left, intersecting with Illfang's Nodachi's trajectory. A loud metallic sound rang out and many sparks were formed, as the boss and I were knocked back more than two meters from the recoil of each other's sword.

At the opportunity that was produced—— Asuna seized it at a remarkable speed equal to mine.

"Yaaaaa!!"

With short and sharp fervor she used «Linear», stabbing deep into the Kobold king's right flank. The fourth HP gauge, slightly, but surely decreased in width.

I was conscious of my right hand's strong reaction, consumed equally by the feeling of success and anxiety.

The Illfang during the beta period which was equipped with «Talwar»'s sword skills, was impossible to counter using my own sword skills. However, perhaps the Katana-type sword skills were lighter than the Talwar's, my HP gauge did not decrease because of the clash. Instead, the speed of the technique was not as terrible as it was supposed to be. Continuing this with no misses, I wondered if it was possible.

Another one. Troopers required three, Sentinels required four, strikes of «Linear» from Asuna, but as expected of a boss, its HP was at an amount that couldn't be compared with the small fries'. The girl tried to cut the fourth gauge, not knowing how many times it would take to take it down. A big advantage of fighting the boss as a team was due to its massive bulk, allowing multiple players to hit it at the same time, if it were possible I would have preferred other players as attackers by her side. But all the other groups from A to G stayed behind as their HP were greatly reduced. I couldn't ask them for help until they had used their recovery potions.

"—— Asuna and I, could only do what we could do. Originally I was thinking of doing it on my own, but it became two people, this was a situation that I am grateful for."

".....The next one, is coming!"

After recovering from the technique's delay, I cried that out, and concentrated on the long and large blade brandished by the boss.

* * *

In August this year, one thousand testers were recruited for the «Sword Art Online Closed Beta Test». Although I reached the tenth floor, I didn't meet the floor's boss.

The district labyrinth, named «Thousand Snake Castle», was guarded by Samurai type monsters, and was the spawning area of the «Orochi Elite Guard», which I could not break through. Since the phantasmagoric katana skills they used were not available to players, I had to receive every hit to feel and determine its skill name and trajectory motion and desperately used that as reference. And finally, once all their used skill's «Pre-motion» were ingrained in my brain..... it was already the thirty-first of August.

Orochi and Illfang, although their shapes and sizes were very different, were both Humanoid type monsters, and used similar techniques so far. Therefore, I used my memories of skills, including Iai, that I stored four months ago to counter its attacks.

Of course, I was walking on a tightrope. The boss' slash had very high base damage, and the basic skills «Slant» and «Horizontal» left to the Assist would not repel it. In order to launch the technique successfully, the body had to be moved deliberately in order to boost the speed and power of the skill.

However, with the skills outside the system mastered, the attack would be very powerful yet risky. Even a little movement or

mistake would hinder the system assist, in the worst case having the sword skill stop in the middle.

I, with a total of two months of experience playing SAO, that is if the beta period was included, had obviously continued to practice this technique which requires great concentration in that long period of time.

And, every fifteenth or sixteenth time, it was disrupted.

“Cra.....!!”

Cursing, I attempted to cancel the «Vertical» which I had cut vertically, I pre-read Illfang’s blade, it moved and drew half a circle as Illfang turned underneath it. It was the motion for the technique that fired off randomly up and down *Phantom Moon* «Gengetsu». The Anneal Blade in my right hand was unavoidably pulled back, suddenly an unpleasant shock overcame my whole body, and I was unable to move.

“Ah.....!!”

As Asuna by my side gave out a small scream, the nodachi from below jumped up, catching the front of my body.

It felt as cold as ice, a sharp shock. My body was paralyzed, and the HP gauge was reduced by thirty percent.

As I was blown away, I barely remained on my knees, and Asuna rushed towards the Kobold king. I screamed “Don’t!” «Phantom Moon» had a very short delay. Its blade was raised, and glowed red. Not good, this was the three hit skill that killed Diabel, *Scarlet Fan* «Hiōgi» .....

“Nu.....oooo!!”

As it roared loudly, its blade was about to hit Asuna.

As the blade grazed her head, a huge weapon glowed green as it launched its skill. Two-Handed Axe Sword Skill «Whirlwind»——

The Nodachi had shot first, but it was a two handed axe that rotated like a whirlwind which intercepted it. The boss' room trembled at the impact that was born, Illfang was knocked back quite a distance. The attacker must have had both legs wrapped in leather sandals, as he only slid back a meter or so.

Entering the fray, was a brown skinned giant and Group B leader, Egil. I explored my coat pockets while kneeling on the floor as he looked over his shoulders at me, smiling.

"You can drink your pot until it finishes, we'll support you. Damage dealers are the walls, this will not change."

".....Sorry, I leave it to you."

I gave a short answer, as my chest was full while I forced down the recovery potion.

Egil was not the only person who came to the front. His friends and, a few people from Group A and D who had finished recovering as their wounds were light.

I used my eyes to tell Asuna "I'm fine", and shouted at the swordsmen from behind.

"If the boss is surrounded from the back it will use an omni-directional attack! I will be calling out the trajectory of the attacks, so the guys in front, deal with them! You don't have to unreasonably try to cancel it with sword skills, you can avoid large damage just by blocking it with a weapon and a shield properly!"

"Ou!!"

The deep sound of men reverberated, and I imagined that it blended with the roar of irritation that the Kobold king gave.

Part 20

Retreating to beside the wall, while waiting for the recovery potions to slowly take effect, I updated myself on the condition of the rear.

The boss' weapon had changed, and sure enough, along with it, the number of spawns «Pop» of the Ruin Kobold Sentinels had also increased. Kibaou's Group E, as well as the lightly damaged pole-arm equipped Group G, took on all four of the heavily armored guards at the same time. Although they did not take much damage, as long as Illfang remained alive, those four Sentinels would probably jump out of the hole in the wall regularly. The parties resisting them would eventually reach their limits with just the two of them.

In addition to that, in between the front and the rear groups, Group C who were the first to get heavily damaged, were trying to recover their HP like me. However, potions in this game were really frustrating items, having only a slow, continuous healing, «Heal Over Time» effect..... in other words, drinking the bottle would not instantly recover the gauge, increasing gradually in dots instead, and when drinking the potion there is a cooldown time indicated by a «Cooling» icon displayed at the bottom of the vision, which rendered drinking the next bottle useless until it disappeared. On

top of that, the first layer NPC shops only sold these low end products, of which only sorrowful tales could be told of their taste.

Putting the taste aside, because of the set cooldown period, healing from heavy injuries took up a lot of time. Therefore, once someone received damage worthy of a potion, they would normally switch with their partner to take it. Falling to the rear (that is, for Pot rotation) was the general theory, but as the number of those who received unexpectedly heavy wounds multiplied, it became easy for the rotation to break down. On higher floors, the dreamlike item which could instantly recover the gauge, «Healing Crystal», could be obtained, so it such recovery is possible if one does not bother with the cost, but it would be asking too much to have one on hand now.

Therefore, how long Egil and the six people under him who were presently replacing me were able to maintain their HP gauges against the boss's fierce attacks would decide the flow of the battle. For that reason, I would have to predict Illfang's skills the moment it started its preparation motions.

* * *

As I kneeled, of course I kept my eyes carefully peeled while focusing my senses to capture every movement the Boss Kobold made, and after determining the sword skill used I shouted things like "Horizontal slash, right" and "Downward slash, left".

Egil's team of six were not pressured into desperately countering the way I instructed, instead they used their shields and large weapons to guard themselves. In the first place, they were players with «Tank builds», having both high defence and amounts of HP,

but receiving zero damage from the boss' released sword skills was impossible. A loud sound effect would occur, and each time, their gauges were gradually reduced.

In between the group, was a single fencer who danced lightly. Asuna. Never fleeing to the boss's back from its front, as long as Illfang was in a recovery period, «Delay», for even a moment, the chance to impale its body with «Linear» was never wasted. Of course, after repeated strikes the «Hate» value would be focused on Asuna, but the six men who were tanking appropriately used skills such as «Howl» to regain the target's hate to themselves.

Even though it was a dangerous battle, the balance in danger of collapsing if even one of the factors failed, the situation still lasted for close to five minutes.

Soon, the boss' HP finally went below thirty percent, and the final gauge was dyed in red.

At that moment, perhaps letting down his guard for a moment but one of the players acting as a tank tripped over. While staggering, where the player stopped, was positioned right behind Illfang.

".....Get out of there quickly!"

I called out reflexively, but it was a moment too late. As the boss felt that it was «In a surrounded state», it gave out an exceptionally ferocious roar.

Boom, its large body sank down. Then its entire body sprung up in a high vertical jump. In its trajectory, its body and Nodachi, contorted and rolled as it jumped. It was the omnidirectional attack *Whirling Wheel* «Tsumujiguruma»——.....

“U.....ooaa!!”

As I gave off a short howl, forgetting even that my own HP had not fully recovered, I jumped from beside the wall.

Carrying my sword on my right shoulder, my left foot kicked the floor at full force. The acceleration that shouldn’t had been possible with my actual Agility smashed against my back, my body flew up diagonally into the sky like it was shot from a gun. Single handed sword rush technique «Sonic Leap». Its range was shorter than «Rage Spike», but its trajectory could be aimed towards the sky.

The sword in my right hand was wrapped up in a bright yellow-green light. In its path was Illfang’s katana, which had reached the apex of its jump, producing a deep crimson shine.

“Reach..... it————!!”

As I shouted, I stretched my right arm to its limit, and swung my sword.

The point of my beloved Anneal Blade +6 drawing a long arch as it raced through the air, hit the left section of the waist of Illfang, on the verge of using «Tsumujiguruma».

Zashuu! A loud slashing sound emitted. The intense light effects which showed that it was a critical hit flashed in my eyes. In the next moment, the Kobold king’s mass was sent tilting to its side, crashing to the ground before the tornado that is its special attack could even form.

“Guruu!”

It yelled, as it tried to stand up as both its feet and arms wobbled. It was a bad status that affected humanoid type monsters, the «Tumble» state ——.

I barely landed successfully, and turned to face Illfang, before forcing out the air in my lungs to shout.

"Everyone ——! «Full Attack»!! Surround it!!"

"O.....oooooh!!"

Egil's six men shouted as if to release the anger that had concentrated because they were made to guard all this while. Surrounding the fallen Kobold king, they activated all their vertical cutting sword skills at the same time. Axes, maces and hammers wrapped in lights of various colours, roared as they rained down on its body. Bright lights and loud sound effects exploded, and Illfang's HP gauge which was shown at the top of the field of vision went down scratch by scratch.

This was a gamble. If the Kobold king's HP was reduced to nothing before it got up, it would be our victory. If it gets out of the «Tumble» status first, we would be met with «Tsumujiguruma» again, and this time everyone would be cut down. My «Sonic Leap» was in the middle of the «Cooling» period, so I was unable to deal attacks in the air.

Egil's group who had recovered from the delay of their techniques, began to get into the motions for the next skills. The Kobold king stopped struggling at the same time, and its body started to rise.

".....We are not going to make it?!!"

I forced my voice down as I shouted, then raised my voice at Asuna who moved beside me while I was not paying attention.

“Asuna, one final «Linear», let’s go for it!!”

“Understood!!”

As her answer was so upbeat, I could not help but smile.

The weapons of the six people hummed once again, throwing the boss’s giant body into a swirl of light effects.

However, before the lights even faded, the boss roared as it stood up. Its HP gauge was left with merely three percent, shining brightly in red.

Egil was still stuck in delay, unable to move. In contrast, Illfang who was attacked while in the «Tumble» state was neither stunned nor knocked back, smoothly entering its vertical jump motion.

“Let’s..... go!!”

As soon as I screamed, I kicked the ground at the same time as Asuna.

Through the gaps in Egil’s party, Asuna first sent a «Linear» at the boss’ left flank.

Slightly behind it, my sword coated in a blue light, made a cut from the Kobold king’s right shoulder to its stomach.

The HP gauge..... was left with a dot.

It felt like the demi-human gave a smirk. In return, I gave off a fierce smile as well, quickly realigning my wrist.

“O...oooooh!!”

I swung my sword with my body and spirit. The blade, which was nicked in several places after the fierce battle, drew a "V" shaped trajectory along with the earlier slash, exiting from Illfang's left shoulder. One-handed-sword two-consecutive-strikes skill «Vertical Arc»——

The Kobold king's gigantic frame, suddenly lost its strength, staggering backward.

Its wolflike face looked at the ceiling, as it gave a howl. On its body, various cracks appeared noisily, snapping and crackling.

Both its hands went slack, and its nodachi fell on the floor. Right after that, Aincrad's first floor's boss, «Illfang the Kobold Lord»'s body shattered into millions of fragments, and scattered in all directions grandly. As I bent backwards under the intangible pressure, the purple system message [You got the last attack!!] flickered soundlessly into my vision.

* * *

As the boss disappeared, the remaining Sentinels in the back seemed to have scattered into the void as well.

The hue of the shining torches on the walls changed from a gloomy orange into a bright yellow. The dimness in the boss' room was removed at once, and from goodness knows where a cool wind swept across the room, taking away the heat of the battle.

There was barely any who broke the silence. Group G and E who remained in the back, Group A, C, D and F who were on their knees, awaiting recovery, and Egil alongside his Group B, the «Final Wall»,

sitting on the floor, dazedly looking around. It was almost as if we were worried about the terrifying demi-human king reviving.

I too, with my right hand holding the sword in the slashing position, remained stationary.

Is this really the end? Would any «Minor differences from Beta» occur here as well.....?

And, at that time. A small white hand gently touched my right shoulder, causing me to slowly lower my sword. Standing there, was the rapier user Asuna. Her chestnut long hair waving in the breeze, as she stared at me.

With her hooded cape off, revealing her face, this was the first time I saw something so beautiful I doubted it was the player's true appearance. I continued to stare hazily at her beauty, Asuna —— probably just for this moment —— silently accepted the stare without a trace of annoyance. She eventually whispered.

"Thanks for your hard work!"

At those words, I was finally convinced. It was over..... the first floor which had confined eight thousand players, the greatest obstacle, has finally been cleared.

And, as if my system was awaiting that recognition of mine, a new message appeared in my view. Experience gained. The distribution of coll. And finally —— items obtained.

As everyone that was there saw the same thing, their expressions lightened up. After a short moment, a *Waa!!* cheer occurred.

Some people threw both hands up in the air. Some embraced their comrades. Some danced nonsensically. In this storm of uproar, a

large figure slowly got off the floor and walked over. It was the two-handed-axe user, Egil.

".....Those were wonderful commands. And brilliant sword skills beyond even that. Congratulations, this victory is rightfully yours."

Even with the English word in the middle, the giant pronounced the sentence perfectly, and as his mouth closed, he had a large grin. His gigantic right hand clenched, and stretched it out.

I wondered how to respond, but sadly nothing came to my mind, and I could only say "No.....", as I formed my right hand into a fist as well at least, raising it.

At that moment.

"———— Why!!"

Suddenly, that loud shout burst out from behind me. As I turned halfway around, due to that loud shout that sounded like a lament, the entire room became calm in an instant.

Looking away from Asuna and Egil, I turned to see a man in light armor, a scimitar user, whose name I could not recall. However, as soon as his mouth parted and the distorted words emitted from his mouth, I understood.

"———— Why, did you leave Diabel-san to die!!"

This man was, Group C..... which was the deceased knight Diabel's group, his comrade from the very beginning. If I looked past him, the remaining four members behind him, stood looking dishevelled. Some of them were crying.

Looking at the scimitar user again, I murmured. I really couldn't understand those words.

"Let him die.....?"

"That's right!! Because..... Because you knew the skills the boss used, didn't you!! If you gave us that information from the start, Diabel wouldn't have died!!"

Speaking as if he was vomiting blood, the remaining raid members began to mumble. "Now that you mention it....." "Why.....? It wasn't even written in the strategy guide....." Such voices were born, and gradually spread across the room.

Giving them the answers, as I had expected, was Kibaou ——

Not. He was standing motionlessly further away, as if trying to resist something that was pulling at his mouth. However, one of the team members of Group E under his leadership walked closer toward me, pointing at me with the index finger on his right hand, and said.

"I..... I know!! This guy, he's a beta tester!! That is why, the boss' attack patterns, good hunting spots and quests, he knows all of them!! He hid them despite knowing about them!!"

Even though he heard those words, the scimitar user and other members from Group C did not show surprise. I thought they might have heard it from Diabel, but —— as a beta tester himself, and hiding that fact from his comrades, it was unlikely that Diabel brought up the topic of beta testers on his own —— when I saw through those katana skills that should have never been seen before by anyone, they must have known since then.

Instead, the scimitar user's eyes seemed to seethe in hatred, as he tried to shout out something again.

It was interrupted by the mace user who had served as a tank with Egil until the end. He raised his hand honestly, and said in a calm tone.

"Even so, the guide that was handed out yesterday, it was written that it was only information on the boss's attack pattern during the beta period, right? If he was really a beta tester, wouldn't his knowledge be the same as in the guide?"

"Tha, That is....."

Substituting the Group E member who became silent, the scimitar user spoke in a voice dripping with hatred.

"That strategy guide was a lie. Argo's information shop was selling lies. That person was a beta tester after all, there's no way she would have given us the truth for free."

——*This is bad. This is becoming very bad.*

I quietly held my breath. I could endure any amount of condemnation on myself. However, a situation where hostility flares up towards the other testers, starting with Argo, was one that I want to avoid by all means. But —— But, what should I do.....

At this time, as I looked down on the light black floor. The system message was still vividly displayed. The acquired experience, coll, and items.....

Instantly.

An idea occurred to me. Additionally, a large conflict within it caused my body to quiver. If I take this choice, I don't know what kind of future I will see. There was the risk of being killed in a sneak attack, like what I had feared in the past. However —— at the very least, the animosity directed against Argo and other beta testers might just be avoidable.....

Behind me, in silence, Egil and Asuna who had patiently endured up to this moment, opened their mouths at the same time.

"Hey, you guys....." "You....."

However, I delicately moved my hands to subtly quieten them.

I took a step forward, intending to have an impudent expression, and coolly looked at the scimitar user's face. I shrugged my shoulders, and told him in a voice as apathetic as I could muster.

"Beta tester, was it? .....Don't lump me together with those amateurs."

"Wha..... What was that.....?"

"Listen here and remember this. SAO's CBT «Closed Beta Test» had a ridiculously low pass rate for the lottery draw. Out of the one thousand people, how many real MMO gamers do you think got selected? Most of them were just «Newbie» players who didn't even know methods of leveling properly. You guys here are much better than that lot."

At the end of my contemptuous words, the forty two players fell silent simultaneously. A chill, like the atmosphere before fighting the boss, returned, forming into invisible knives brushing across their skin.

"——But, I'm not like those guys."

Deliberately sneering, I opened my mouth and broke the silence.

"During the beta test, I reached floors that no one else could reach. I learned of the Katana Skills the boss used since I kept fighting mobs that used katanas from a floor way higher. I know way more other things too, there's no way even that Argo person could even match me."

".....What, is that....."

The person who first pointed me out as a beta tester, the man from Group E, said out in a hoarse voice.

"That's..... no longer on the level of a beta tester.... that's totally cheating, you are just a cheater!"

From around us, yeah, cheater, cheating beta tester, many voices with those words came out. Those words were soon mixed up together, in the end a strange sounding word, «Beater», reached my ears.

".....«Beater», that has a good ring to it."

Laughing and grinning, I looked around at everybody in that area, and told them in a clear voice.

"Exactly, I am a «Beater». From now on, please do not lump me together with those former testers."

————*That should do it.*

From here on, the current four or five hundred people that seem to be beta testers, will now be further divided into two categories. The

majority «Testers who are merely amateurs» and, the remaining few «Information controlling dirty Beaters».

In the future, the hostilities from new players, should be all directed towards Beaters. Suppose a beta tester is found out, players would not hate them on sight.

In return, I alone, will have lost the ability to fight on the front lines in any guilds or parties..... However, it's not like much has changed. I am a «Solo» even now, and I will still remain a solo. That is all.

The scimitar user became pale-faced and fell silent, and along with the members of Group C, they looked away from the Group E member. I opened my menu window and ran my finger along the equipment figure.

The dark gray leather coat that I had worn up till now, was instead set to the unique product dropped by the boss just a moment ago, the «Coat of Midnight». My body was then wrapped in a small glowing light, and the ragged shade of gray was replaced by a shiny jet black leather. Its length also increased, as the hem hit my knees.

I waved that black long coat with a flourish, turning to my back —— and faced the small door further inside the boss's room.

"I'll go on and «Activate» the second floor's transfer gate. From the exit up there it will be a short walk to the district town, if you want to come along, be prepared to be killed by any mob that comes along."

Egil and Asuna, kept staring at me, as I started the walk.

The two of them had eyes which showed that they understood everything. That was a relief. I faced the both of them and gave a

small smile, stepped forward with large strides, and pushed the door to the second floor, right behind the main throne, open.

* * *

After climbing the narrow spiral staircase for a while, a door appeared once more.

As it gently opened, a spectacularly scenic view jumped into my eyes. Outside of the door was a steep cliff by the hillside. A narrow terrace-like fleet of stairs down the hill was set to the left in the rocks, but I first swept my eyes through the scenic view of the second floor.

Unlike the complex and various terrain of the first floor, the second floor was lined from one end to the other with flat-topped mountains. The mountain tops were covered in lush green grass, where gigantic ox-type monsters swaggered about.

The second floor's district town, «Urbus», looked as if it was a city entirely excavated out from the flat-topped mountain at the bottom of my sight. I now went down the fleet of stairs, as I had earlier described, it only required walking a short kilometer across the field, to reach the «Teleport Gate» in the central square of Urbus which would be activated upon touch, linking to the «Starting City» on the first floor.

If, by any chance, I died along the way —— or perhaps, if I sat here idly, two hours after the boss is defeated, the teleport gate would open by itself automatically. But today, the fact that the first Raid unit was going to challenge the boss must have already been conveyed to the Starting City, and many players would now be waiting at the teleport gate, waiting for the moment the blue warp

gate appears. I really should hurry to Urbus for their sake, but..... for just a little bit more, I should have the right to immerse myself in this breath-taking view.

I took a few steps forward, I sat down near a terrace jutting out from the rocks.

Beyond the lined rocky mountains, from the opening of Aincrad's perimeter, a little bit of the blue sky could be seen.

I wonder just how many minutes passed that way. Eventually, small footsteps could be heard climbing up the spiral staircase behind me. As I continued without turning, the one causing the footsteps stopped after coming out of the main door, and following a faint sigh, the person came closer again, and sat down beside me.

".....And I told you not to follow too."

I muttered, and the intruder answered with dissatisfaction.

"You didn't say so. All that you said was you must be prepared to die if you wish to come."

".....Is that so, sorry."

My neck drew in, and as I sat next to the rapier user Asuna, I glanced at that face of hers that was beautiful from every angle. For a moment, her light brown eyes caught mine, but I immediately restored my sight to the view below us, speaking out "Pretty" while sighing.

It was quiet like that for close to a minute, before she suddenly spoke up.

"Egil-san and Kibaou have something to say to you."

“Eh..... What is it?”

“Egil-san’s words were “Let’s go for the second floor’s boss raid together”, while Kibaou.....”

Asuna gave a small cough, and with a serious face, attempted to imitate the Kansai dialect with awkward results.

“.....’You may have helped me today, but I still don’t recognize you. I will aim to clear this game my own way.’ was what he said.”

“.....Is that so.”

I repeated those words in my mind a few times —— Asuna gave a small cough, and continued while looking away.

“And also.... this is, my own message to you.”

“Wha..... What?”

“You, shouted out my name in battle, didn’t you.”

Well, and I recalled it in an instant. Certainly somewhere in the heat of battle I had roughly called out a name without honorifics.

“So-Sorry, I forgot the honorifics..... or was it, that I pronounced it wrong?”

This time, Asuna gave a puzzled look.

“Pronounced.....? —— What I meant was, I never gave you my name, and you never told me yours, right? How did you know my name?”

“Haa!?”

I involuntarily cried out. How did I find out —— because we were still in a party, so in the upper left corner of my field of vision, two HP gauges were displayed, and underneath one, five letters, [ASUNA], were clearly written.....

"Ah... co- could it be..... this is the first time you've formed a party with someone.....?"

"Yes."

".....I see."

My mouth slacked open involuntarily, as I lifted my right hand, pointing to the left edge of Asuna's field of vision.

"Around here, you can see an additional HP gauge other than your own, right? Underneath it, isn't something written there?"

"Um....."

Murmuring, Asuna turned her face, trying to look to the left, and I held back her cheeks with my fingertips subconsciously.

"When your face moves the gauge would also move. With your face fixed, use your eyes to look to the left."

"Like..... Like this?"

Asuna's hazel eyes moved about clumsily, and saw a string of words I could not see. Out of her glossy lips, came three quiet sounds.

"Ki.....ri.....to. Kirito? Is that your name?"

"Yup."

"Really..... This whole time, it was written here....."

Asuna whispered, and her whole body suddenly shook. And finally, I realized my palm was still left on her cheek. This was—— just like some sort of «Pre-motion».

I let my hand go in a hurry, and a **Gyuntto** sound was likely made from the force as I looked away. After a few seconds, *Giggle*, I heard those sounds —— or at least, that's what it felt like. Eh, could she be laughing? That transcendent «Linear» user, Kobold «Overkill» performer Asuna-san? I thought in my mind, but despite the strong desire to see her face, I desperately endured it.

Regrettably, the laughter soon stopped, replaced by a quiet voice.

".....To tell the truth, Kirito, I followed you here to thank you."

".....For the cream bread, and the bath?"

As I asked without thinking, "That's not it," she replied in a somewhat scary voice, and she immediately continued with a ".....Although, that may be a part of it too."

"That's right..... there are a lot of things. Thanks for the many things. I..... In this world, for the first time I found an aim, something that I want to chase after."

"Heeh..... What is it?"

As I glanced at her, Asuna flashed a brief smile,

"It's a secret."

That was all she said. She stood back up, and stepped back.

".....I will, do my best. Do my best to become stronger. To get to my aims."

I faced my back to her, and nodded gently.

“Aah..... You will be strong. Not only in your sword techniques, but you will have greater and more valuable strength. So, if one day someone you trust invites you to a guild, don’t you refuse. There’s an absolute limit for solo players, after all.....”

“.....”

For the next few seconds, only Asuna’s breathing could be heard.

Eventually, the words that reached me, were a little unexpected.

“.....The next time we meet, tell just how did you carry me out of that labyrinth section.”

“Aah.....”

That’s a piece of cake, I thought of following up with that, but I swallowed those words. Instead, I answered with a simple “I understand.”.

“.....Then, see you again, Kirito.”

Squeak The door opened. Footsteps. *Bam* The door shut.

I waited until the information describing the fragrance Asuna left dispersed from the virtual air, before standing up. That girl and I walked in different directions —— I began to descend the wide staircase down the cliff step by step.

Counting the number of steps the endlessly winding stone staircase had, it turned out there were forty eight steps. And upon giving a little thought if there was any meaning to that number, I realized. It was eight by six —— in other words the number of people in a Full Raid. Assuming a situation where the first floor’s boss was

challenged with that line-up, and none of them died, these stairs, from landing to landing, would have just enough space for each player.

But surely, the designers of this area, would not have imagined that the group of players walking down these steps would be a *group* of one.

Going down this path seemed to imply what my future would be like. There was no one to my front or back. No matter where I went, wherever I went, it would be alone.....

However.

After going over a number of landings on the stairs, in the right corner of my field of vision, was a small icon of a letter flashing.

It was a Friend Message, of which could be sent and received even when not on the same floor. And I have only registered two players as friends. My first friend Cline and —— the information dealer, Argo the Rat.

Who is it, I wondered as I opened the message, and found it was the latter.

[Looks like I gave you a really hard time, Ki-bou]

Looking at these first few words, "Info sure travels fast!" was what I ended up reflexively speaking aloud. I continued reading, and scrolled through, but there was only one following sentence.

[To apologize, I will sell you one piece of information on anything at all for free.]

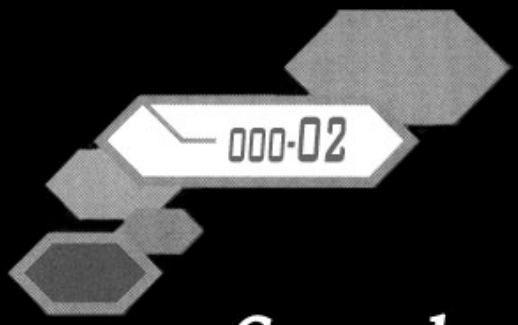
————*Ho.*

I couldn't help but grin, and I continued to walk once again while taking out the hologram keyboard, and quickly typed out a reply.

[Then tell me the reason for your whiskers in person.]

Then, I pressed the send button, laughed once more, and having reached the ground of the second floor at that very moment, I started to walk towards the main city, «Urbus».

(End)



Sound of Water, Sound of Hammer

Aincrad 48th Floor
August 2024

水音、槌音

みずおと、つちおと

アインクラッド第48層　２０２４年８月

九里史生

“Please reinforce it.”

I stared hard at the face of my client, who placed a long sword in a white scabbard onto the counter while calmly saying that line, for roughly two seconds.

“...Wh-What is it?”

Upper body leaning away, the other party finally responded with a single cough.

“It-It’s nothing. ...It’s just that, I was wondering how long you’re intending to drag this sword along.”

It was a line meant as a light jab at that display of bashfulness, but

“It-It’s fine, isn’t it, me dragging it about. I like it, after all.”

—and I was once again, at a loss of words at that reply. If we were to continue looking at each other face to face like this, that near unnoticeable reddish tinge on my cheeks would be exposed, so I hastily averted my face and spoke.

“Well, it’s just like you to not even update your equipment though. Well then, please come along to the workshop.”

Reaching my hands towards the counter, I lifted the long sword with my fighting spirit, going “Yoisho!”.

The reason my face turned red was simple.

It was because three months ago, this slender long sword in my arms right now, «Dark Repulser», was what I— Lisbeth the smith,

forged by swinging my smith hammer; in other words it was a player-made weapon. Furthermore, the black-haired, black-clothed one-handed sword user, Kirito, who just made the "I like it" comment, was the person I am in ceaselessly in love with, ever since the day we met.

* * *

My shop, «Lisbeth's Equipment Shop» stood in the southern district of the main town area on Aincrad's 48th floor. It was somewhat average among the manufacturing-class player shops, with the sales area and workshop situated on the first floor, and the second organized into four rooms for the kitchen and bedrooms.

As for the reason it was valued highly despite that house plan, was due to the fact that it was furnished with a large water wheel at the back of the house, connected to a waterway. Various large-scale devices could be connected to the power transmitting axle that pierced through the wall, reaching into the workshop. For a bakery, a flour mill; as for a tailor, a weaving loom; and as such, for a smith, bellows or a sharpening wheel. Considering the merit of automating these tools that would originally require a player to push and turn them by hand, the thumping sound of its rotation that rang out regardless of day or night could be said to be rather pleasant.

Kirito appeared at the shop early in the afternoon, in the second summer of Aincrad. As it was a time when steadfast players secluded themselves in the hunting grounds or labyrinth areas, while the converse sipped away at iced drinks after a meal at bars or restaurants, there were no other customers within the shop.

I left the NPC, Hanna (female, estimated to be fifteen years old, surname, Heinemann) to tend to the shop, and moved towards the workshop while carrying the heavy sword. After Kirito, who came along, opened the door without requiring any additional prompting, the sound of the water wheel's rotation became remarkably louder.

"...It's such a relief that Aincrad's summers aren't that hot, really."

His impression was probably due to spotting the furnace burning red hot in a corner of the room, I thought, as I heard him speak from behind. I lowered myself onto the chair beside the anvil, unintentionally broke into a wry smile.

"If you care about the heat, you should just take that off when you're within the area, at least."

The trademark of Kirito, who possessed the cool title of «The Black Swordsman», was that black leather coat of his that extended below his knees; if one were to take up that sort of appearance in the real world during August, it would probably eventually result in heatstroke. Leaving the sheathed «Dark Repulser» on the anvil for the moment, I shifted my view to Kirito, who was leaning against the wall, and he had a bitter smile on while scratching his head.

"It's like, well, aside from sleeping, I just can't calm down without this on nowadays, you know..."

"That said, don't tell me you actually had the same one equipped since the first floor?"

Previously, when I was chatting with my close friend, Asuna, at this very spot, the topic ended up being Kirito's only set of clothes. According to her, it seemed that he had the same appearance ever

since he got his hands on a unique rare, «Coat of Midnight», from the floor boss on the first floor.

At my question, Kirito smiled once again and shook his head.

“I do have to update my armor every now and then. This «Blackwyrm Coat» is the.. fourth generation, I guess?”

“Oh... That’s a monster drop too?”

“Nope, it’s player-made...”

That somewhat complicated expression that flashed past Kirito’s face as he replied did not escape my gaze. Maintaining my smile, I pressed on without a moment’s delay.

“Oh. Which shop is it from?”

“Well, that’s... it’s just something from A-«Ashley’s»...”

“Ohh. Hehh. Is that so.”

As I dragged my words out, Kirito made the truly conspicuous motion of averting his eyes.

Ashley was a charismatic seamstress, widely said to be Aincrad’s number one. Although it wasn’t like she was a business rival to me, a smith, she set up shop in Lindas like me, in the northern section, and it was thrice the size of mine (with two water wheels), not to mention the shop’s name, «Ashley’s», was one most could not help but to notice. In addition, the person in question was a considerable beauty in her early twenties.

Likely due to being aware that the defensive line-up in my Lisbeth Equipment Shop included lightweight armor for swordsmen using

one-handed swords as well, Kirito babbled on with an expression on the verge of letting out a cold sweat effect.

"Nah, it's just that my build is based on leather armor and all, and the only tailor I knew that could handle a high grade raw material like black dragon leather was Ashley-san, so I really had no choice at all, you see..."

"I didn't even say anything, did I. But still, if I'm not wrong, wasn't it Ashley-san's policy on custom-made items to only take up requests that interested her?"

"Re-Really? I was, you know, referred there by Asuna, her regular customer... oh right, that's just like the first time I came to Lis's shop, isn't it. That time was a real disaster, eh, smashing that sword you were selling when I tried swinging it and..."

Upon getting to that point, he froze up with an expression that said "Oh-crap-I-stepped-on-a-land-mine", and I ended up bursting out in laughter, unable to suppress it any further.

"Ahaha... there's no need to make a face like that, that's nothing more than a good lesson to me now. Back then, I did make swords only focused on Accuracy and Quickness, without much care for their durability, after all. Swords that are strong with the system assistance are popular, but I realized that the swords that'll protect my customers' lives in a pinch are the durable ones..."

After my laughter settled down and I turned back to the anvil, I lifted «Dark Repulser» up once again. I gently pulled the sword out from its sheath, it was heavy enough for me to have no proper way of swinging it in actual combat even if I could carry it around with my STR.

The blade that was fairly slender for a one-handed long sword was silver, with a faint bluish tint. Asuna's beloved sword, «Lambent Light», was of translucent silver much like a crystal, but in contrast the appearance of this was exactly like that which often appears in fantasy works, «Mithril Silver».

"If I'm not mistaken, this is +39 at the moment, right?"

"Yep. In short, I'm challenging for that +40 today."

Kirito assented to my question without hesitation, but having a number of +40 as a reinforcement value wasn't quite common.

Every piece of equipment that existed in Aincrad possessed a property named «Reinforcement Attempts Count». As its name implied, it was the number of times one could challenge for a reinforcement on it, and that number fell by one each time, regardless of success or failure.

The value of the attempts count for «Dark Repulser» was 50, far more than the rest, among the swords I forged. And now, the remaining count was 8. In other words, the results of reinforcement thus far was 39 successes, compared to a mere 3 failures. Putting it into a success rate, it was at, erm... approximately 93 percent. This was a figure that could already be said to be a miracle, and if the information brokers were to get wind of it, they would likely come here straight away, sniffing for the trick to it. But still, even if they were to come, it's not like I knew the reason for it.

In any case, the reason why this sword that was forged three months ago could still be used by Kirito on the frontlines (currently the 70th floor), was mainly due to this terrifying reinforcement value. Players uninterested in weapon reinforcement mostly updated the

arms they mainly used with each floor, but Kirito equipping the sword that I made for this long was a cause for happiness, and conversely, concern, as well.

As for why that was so, if one planned to boost the success rate of reinforcement to its maximum value, the quality and quantity of the raw materials required simply became outrageous. Even if he was a solo player, laying claim to all of the drop items, it was not difficult to guess that an immense amount of time was needed to gather all those raw materials.

—How about abandoning this sword, and advancing to a rare weapon dropped on the frontlines?

I wonder if I should be giving such advice, as a smith myself.

Probably, if it's a rare weapon at the class of the 70th floor's, by getting to around +20, its cumulative properties should be able to match this «Dark Repulser +39». And considerably fewer raw materials would be required for reinforcement compared to the present.

As I stared at the sword, I took in a breath of air, and opened my mouth.

However, the words that came out were—

"...The raw materials, you made sure to get all of them, right? If you're challenging for +40, I have no desire to do it without the probability fully boosted."

Stifling my inner thoughts, I spoke with my lips pouted, and Kirito nodded with a broad grin.

"Of course."

The right hand fitted into a fingerless glove (of course, made from black leather) nimbly manipulated a window. What materialized was an excessively large leather bag. Laying the sword down and peeking into the bag I received, metal plates that appeared undoubtedly high grade, along with fangs and horns of monsters, various types of jewels and such were tightly packed within.

Spreading those onto the floor to confirm their quantity would require a dreadful amount of time, so I tapped the bag with my finger, displaying a small window indicating its content. Tapping the sword atop the anvil next and hitting once again, on the reinforcement value shown on the small window, a sub-window with the information on the raw material items needed for reinforcement floated out.

If I were to drag the bag's window with my fingertip, the moment it got into contact with the sword's, it would automatically go into comparison mode, informing whether both contents are the same. If the items' names and quantities all turned blue, it was a complete match.

"Looks okay. But really now, it's amazing how you manage to gather this much every single time!"

After I voiced out a line that went against my actual thoughts again, Kirito casually shrugged his shoulders.

"Most of the items drop even at the frontlines, so they naturally pile up while mapping. There's only a small portion that I have to gather over at the lower floors, you know."

I knew just how difficult it was to gather the required amount of that «small portion», with me doing the same for my one-handed

mace on occasions. But as expected, words opposing that left my mouth.

"Don't let the news that the clearers are rampaging about the lower floors get tattled on to the information brokers. I'm totally against getting onto the newspaper as «That Mr. Big Shot Bastard's favorite shop» or anything like that!"

"Hahaha, I limited myself to only hunt at the lower floors late at night, so it's fine."

"...Is that so. Well, that's fine, then."

Mapping the frontlines' dangerous labyrinth areas in the day, and after taking a mere short nap, switching to the tiresome work of gathering materials. That meant Kirito had kept up that sort of lifestyle for these three months. I checked his complexion with a sidelong glance on reflex, but that smoothness on his avatar was just like that of a girl's, without any sign of the fatigue that must have accumulated within him.

Chewing over the silent discord in my mind, I cleared away all of the windows with a single wave of my right hand.

"Well then, let's get started right away. What's the property you want?"

"Sharpness, please!"

My perpetually positive client gave a slight nod in return, and after I reached my hands out to the large forge, what could be said to be the main fixture of the room, I changed the menu from «Production» to «Reinforcement». Setting the details to Sharpness, I poured the raw materials for reinforcement, stuffed in the bag, into it.

Actually, there was a need to operate the bellows until the furnace burns bright red, but thanks to the water wheel, that process was currently automated. The small hand-carry furnace meant for street stalls used fuel, so bellows were unnecessary, but it did not have the capacity to take in this large quantity of raw materials.

The large furnace that easily swallowed down the objects, which numbered over a hundred, somehow appeared delighted as it burned ever stronger, and the mass of raw materials was liquefied in mere seconds. The blaze, which was orangey-red in color, turned into the silver used to represent the Sharpness reinforcement mode.

Without further delay, I thrust «Dark Repulser», extracted from its scabbard, into the furnace. The silver-tinted light wrapped around the blade, and right as it started gleaming brilliantly, I moved the sword to the anvil.

All that was left was to hit it with the smith hammer for the required number of times.

Although I really had no choice but to swing the hammer for close to two hundred and fifty times back when this sword was meticulously forged from the ingot, for reinforcement, whether challenging for +1 or +40, the number of hits needed was fixed at ten.

I unfastened my beloved «Zoringen Hammer +20» from the belt on my waist, and firmly held the grip, wound up with red leather.

Smith hammers were classified as tool items while being blunt-type weapons at the same time, so they naturally could be reinforced. That said, it was impossible to hit it with itself, so I had a sub-hammer exclusively for the sake of reinforcing it.

I matched my breathing with the lifting of my beloved hammer, the so-called 'beloved sword' of my own, that though not at the level of Kirito's tenacity, still took a good two months to reinforce. I held it still for a slight bit at its peak, and brought it down in one go.

Kaan!, a clear hammer sound. The sound I loved. Silver and orange mingled in the scattered sparks, springing onto the floor and vanishing.

Two times. Three times. When producing my goods for sale, or reinforcing the weapons of other customers, I was able to achieve a state of nothingness on the very first hit—or rather, I became entirely absorbed in the sounds and lights, but only when working on Kirito's sword did I end up getting my personal feelings involved.

Do protect that person; be sure to come back to this workshop with him; I would swing my hammer as I speak.

Four times, five times. As long as this sword stayed on Kirito's back, we were connected by a unique bond. I was unable to guard his back during the boss clearing battles like Asuna, but I could assist him by repairing his sword's durability, and increasing its reinforcement value.

Six times, seven times.

...However.

This bond would not last forever. «Dark Repulser»'s reinforcement attempts count would decrease by one yet again today, with 7 left. If it were to continue being reinforced at this pace, there would be two months left... it would wear out before the arrival of winter. If that

happened, there would be no choice but to switch over to a new sword to continue fighting at the frontlines.

When that time came, it was not certain that Kirito would request for me to produce a new sword once again. No, that possibility was unlikely. To forge a sword with high specifications, overwhelmingly rare... in other words, extremely highly priced ingots were necessary, but a monster drop wouldn't cost even a single col. To Kirito who was always fighting at the frontlines, participating in all of the boss battles, not to mention having a rather high chance at obtaining the last attack bonus, there should be plenty of opportunities for him to get his hands on a rare one-handed sword.

Eight times. And the right hand of mine that caused the ninth hammering sound to echo out—stopped in midair.

I felt Kirito's confused gaze on my left cheek. But I could not bear to look in that direction.

Instead of swinging the hammer down, I embraced it close to my chest. «Dark Repulser», engulfed in a silver brilliance atop the anvil, was waiting for that final hit in silence. The duration of the reinforcement effect was three minutes. If that time passed by, the glow wrapping up the blade will extinguish, and the reinforcement would result in a failure automatically.

"...I..."

What leaked out from my lips was a quivering voice unfitting of the ever cheerful smith, Lisbeth.

"...I-I won't hit it anymore... Because... Be-Because when the attempts count runs out, this sword's role will... it will then..."

End.

Honestly—Honestly, if I really were thinking for Kirito's sake, I would have thought it better for that day to hurry up and arrive. If he were to advance to a new sword, reinforcing from +1 again, gathering materials will get much easier. My mind understood this, but my arm refused to move. With the hammer clutched to my chest, I could only tremble softly.

Then, I felt Kirito parting from the wall. Step by step, I could hear his muted footsteps stopped right beside me. The hem of that black coat fluttered as it spread out, the swordsman went down on his knees at my side.

"...Hey, Lisbeth. I... have a hunch."

It was a situation where it would have been perfectly fine for him to go, "Hurry up and hit it!" with anger as the client, but Kirito's voice was gentle. Since that night of the day we met, when he recounted various stories to me at the bottom of that dragon's nest; nothing has changed.

"...A hunch?"

I turned apprehensively, and those black pupils shyly blinked once, right in front of my own.

"Yeah. The frontlines are still on the 70th floor, and there's still thirty left above... but I wonder why. I have a hunch— no, a belief that when I fight the last boss of this castle, what I will be holding, is this «Dark Repulser»."

"...Why exactly, do you think so...?"

"Well, you see, the Cardinal System's the one who decided the title for this sword, right? «Dark Repulser», that which will repel darkness... there's no way such a name will be labeled onto anything aside from «end equipment»."

—Having said all that, he looked on at me with that impish grinning face for a bit, without any further words.

Normally, this would have been the point when I took a deep, looong breath, or jab in with a "Why are you running your mouth off like that". But for just this time alone, my lips too, twisted into a meek smile. I answered in a voice that was soft, but trembling no more.

"...That might be right. No... it will, definitely happen..."

"That's right. ...So, come on, that one last hit, finish it off with a klang."

"Yeah. I have a hunch too. This time too, will be a success."

I gently lifted the hammer that I was embracing up once again.

I inhaled a deep breath, stopped, shut my eyelids, and whispered to the sword.

—Sorry for the suspense. You, with your master, have always driven away the darkness from around me, haven't you? I'll believe too... that one day, a time when that light of yours shines upon all of the people imprisoned in this castle will arrive.

Tenderly, and thus, strongly, the hammer swung down.

Ten times.

* * *

The right hand clothed in a black leather glove firmly gripped the hilt of the «Dark Repulser +40» I held out.

Swish, swish the blade flashed with nearly no hint of its weight, dispersing a prismatic display of radiance into the air. Finally, the sword blade slid into its scabbard with a fluid sound, and its owner smiled, seemingly pleased.

"Yeah, with this, the 70th floor boss can just come at me."

"If you're going to say that, don't you dare go tumbling over accidentally right in front of the boss, like on the 69th floor. That report got on the front page of the newspaper, and even I got ashamed over it, you know."

"Y-Yes... Sorry about that..."

Before the smith, Lisbeth, with her arms folded, was the swordsman, Kirito, scratching his head. We had completely returned to how the two of us usually were; it felt somehow comforting, yet just a little lonesome.

Stifling those feelings, I stretched out vigorously.

"O-Oof... Haah, well, anyway, I'm glad it succeeded. Even if the probability was fully boosted, there are still times when it fails. No way will I be accepting another reinforcement attempt this stressful for a while."

I mentioned those lines casually, but upon hearing it, an awkward expression surfaced onto Kirito's features for some reason.

"...What's the matter?"

"N-Nah, that's... actually, just how should I say this, the timing just happened to cross over today..."

"...The timing?"

With that, the swordsman opened his storage window and stored «Dark Repulser». Following that, with some swift manipulation, what materialized above the window was wrapped in a scabbard of black leather, a long sword that gave off an intense presence that I could feel, even from where I stood.

"...I was thinking that it would be nice if I could entrust the +40 for this guy to you as well..."

Those words, along with the sword which was brought before me, «Elucidator», another one that was precious to Kirito, made me gaze at him in silence for several seconds.

"Haa——" And I let out a deep, long sigh.

(END)

ソードアート・オンライン
マテリアル・エディション総集編

Word Gear

ME-04

Cold hand, Warm heart

Aincrad 50th Floor
September 2024

SAO SWORD ART ONLINE

〔ソードアート・オンライン：マテリアル・エディション４〕
Cold hand, Warm heart

２００８年１１月

この『4』から、マテリアル・エディションは小説本へとシフトしていきます。
ちょっと言い訳ぎみなことを書きますが（笑）私にとっての創作というのは、《頭の中の視覚的イメージを伝達する》作業ですので、伝達のためのツールが絵か文字かというのは本質的な差異ではないと考えています。
もちろん絵（漫画）のほうがビジュアルイメージを伝える力は基本大きいのですが、時には《絵に描きづらい情景》というのも存在しますし……。いちおう小説家として活動している現在の目標は、《読んだだけでビジュアルが見える》文章を書くことでしょうか。なかなか難しいですが。

あ　本文について何も書いてなかった……　えーと
いつものキリト氏といつものアスナさんですね。

After completing a day of hunting, I returned to my house on the fiftieth floor, which was located in «Algade», but my body still had that marvelously uncomfortable feeling.

My body movement became slow. I couldn't stand straight. My entire body felt like I was carrying a prop which my back could not achieve the required strength, it felt really heavy, as I opened the main menu window, but could not see any place written in red.

As I unsteadily staggered out onto the path from the square, my thoughts remained uninterrupted.

If this discomfort is a negative status, there should be a warning flashing before my eyes. And since I'm within the District Boundary, negative status such as poison and paralysis should be removed.

Maybe I got affected by a new unknown monster's negative status effects. Even after entering the boundary it did not disappear, and at the same time does not trigger a warning —— something like «Curse».

At this point, an evil cold crept up from my toes to my body, causing me to shiver.

It is still September in Aincrad, too early for winter. But, going through my coat, penetrating deep into my muscles and bones, was like the wind of winter.

I couldn't return to my room under these conditions. Thinking like this, I increased my pace, going into the first hotel I discovered. I quickly rented an empty room at the front desk, and after taking the

key I rolled and crawled to the front of the furthest door from the desk.

As I sat on a simple bed in the narrow room, I unequipped all my equipments to make my body feel lighter, then took out all kinds of antidotes for all kinds of negative statuses and tried them all one by one. I then used a Crystal which could remove all negative effects, and awaited the moment for I returned to normal.

—— However.

".....This..... is..... Really bad....."

This evil cold did not leave, and my field of vision began to blur.

I could no longer withstand it and collapsed onto the bed, and using my brain, whose operating speed had dropped to very low levels, to think, desperately searched for a countermeasure. If this was the «Curse», an NPC in the church should be able to remove it right? However, was there really a church in the *disorderly* [Chaos] Algade's streets?

As I was filtering out the buildings on the map, my consciousness began to fade, so I had no choice but to decide to seek help from others. In other words, I had given up on the idea of solving it on my own.

I opened the directory to my list of friends. With my blurred vision, I searched for Cline's name from a list that couldn't be considered long, selected it, and pressed the button for sending messages, and immediately typed out on the virtual keyboard.

[I can't handle it I'm dying Save me]

After keying in this message which was rich with crisis, yet did not lose its poetic flavor, I pressed the send button, then turned the room into the «Friends Allowed» mode, and lost consciousness.

My forehead was caressed by a cool comforting touch.

As I stirred, I discovered that I was covered by a thick quilt. The bone chilling evil cold had also changed into sweltering sweat inducing heat.

In this uncomfortable heat, the only cool object was applied to my forehead, controlled by a constantly moving hand. At this moment ——

“Ah, you’re awake?”

A refreshingly sweet voice came from beside my pillow. As the word repeated itself a few times in my brain, I realized that it totally didn’t sound like Cline’s crude “Oi, you’ve woken up”.

I desperately opened my heavy eyelids, the thing swaying in my sight was... the «Knights of Blood» Sub Leader, the strongest rapier user, «The Flash» Asuna who actually revealed a gentle smile.

“.....!!?!?”

I was so surprised I wanted to bounce up, but Asuna immediately used her left hand to hold me down.

“Not lying down won’t do. Although it won’t make you better immediately.”

She used her index finger to poke at my cheeks.

What is this all about? How did this happen? Is seeing Cline as Asuna caused by this mysterious negative effect? If this is the case should I call Egil?

These bursts of stupid questions hit me as my brain worked, before finally realizing the truth.

According to the order in the list of friends, Asuna's name was just above Cline's. In my semi conscious state and blurring vision, I just wanted to press his name, and must have pressed the wrong one. In other words, I had sent Asuna —— Aincrad's idol, as well as the heroine of the raiders, some embarrassing information.

What should I do? What is the best action to take?

My brain continued to operate inside my head, as Asuna dunked the damp towel into a basin next to me. *Plop*, the sound of water being displaced could be heard.

The towel was quickly taken back out, squeezed dry, and applied to my forehead once more. The cool comfortable feeling slightly dispersed the heat gathered onto my body.

"The cooling effect of water doesn't last long, but this is the only option. It's better than nothing."

Seeing the smiling Asuna, I could only emit —— a single phrase.

"Tha.....Thank you. Helping me with this."

Subsequently, my cheeks turned into a pink shade, and feeling this change, quickly turned my head to the side, to see Asuna smiling again.

"It's nothing. We should help each other in a moment of need. A person on his own would definitely feel uncomfortable, I understand."

At this kind of time.

That said, Asuna should have experienced this mysterious negative status effect before.

"What kind of negative status effect is this.....? All kinds of antidotes, as well as the Crystal doesn't work on it.....?"

After I inquired, Asuna's hazel eyes blinked.

Then broke out in laughter.

"Ahahaha..... So-sorry..... but..... huff huff..... Being like this, is it your first time?"

"Of..... Of course it is the first time. I've never heard of this status effect."

I replied in an injured tone, and Asuna apologized a few more times, while mopping my head with the wet towel.

"I say, this negative status effect, is neither poison nor paralysis.... it's a sickness. You caught a cold."

"Co.....Cold?"

"Um. It's not your avatar, but your body in the real world which caught a cold. Right now, the seasons should be changing over there. Around this time last year, many people collapsed from this."

"A.....Aah....."

I could not help but sigh.

It was completely in my blind spot. However, this was truly possible. Although the body's five senses were completely cut off, the Nerve Gear was unable to isolate fever and other physical discomfort. In other words, as Asuna said, my real body was what gave me such discomfort.

"Which is why I said, a cool forehead can let you feel more comfortable."

With that said, I looked away from Asuna who was once again wetting the towel, to determine the time. It was eleven thirty at night.

Since I rolled and crawled into this hotel at around six, Asuna had continued to do this for five hours.

Using the «Wettable cloth equipment» to produce a cooling effect, could only last for five minutes at most. Although it was very comfortable, isn't it a waste of effort?

Suddenly, an odd feeling emerged from my chest, causing me to have no idea what to do. In my semi conscious state, I had no idea what this feeling meant.

Instead, I moved my hand out from under the quilt, and held the towel on my forehead, getting ready for Asuna's hand to take it.

"What..... What is it?"

Although her words became obscure, Asuna maintained her smile, while on the other hand I couldn't find any words to reply her. I didn't understand what I was doing either.

It was clearly like this, but my mouth emitted some words in a rough voice on its own.

"Enough with this towel. Instead of it..... just use your hands to touch my forehead."

—— *Don't take advantage of my weakness!!*

Was what I had expected her to spit out, but contrary to my expectations, "..... Em" Asuna answered in a quiet voice.

Squeezing my hand in reply, she used her cool hands to brush across my forehead with the other. As my body was exhausted, my consciousness gradually faded. The anxiety of getting the disease made way for a comfortable sense of security.

As I entered a light sleep, By my ear, I could hear a soft lullaby.

"I said, you..... Kirito..... kun. It's ok to give your cold..... over to me. Like that, you might be able to recover faster."

After that, I could feel a gentle kind of touch to the cheeks, on my face with my eyes closed.

I wanted to open my eyes to confirm —— Obviously, I was unable to do so.

* * *

"..... ooh....."

Asuna grunted, and opened her eyes.

The view entering her eyes was not the white ceiling of her home, but instead it was the black of an old wooden board. The bed was hard and the blanket was thin. Despite complaining to herself to find a better room, she was not in the condition to get out of bed.

Could it be —— a real cold?

No, it is impossible to be infected by a virus in the virtual world. The players were completely separated in the real word, connected only by wires. However, this is too much coincidence!

The strongest solo player, «The Black Swordsman» Kirito, perhaps due to the excellent physical condition, as well as the overnight care by Asuna, had recovered. This is good. This is fine enough.

However, facing this exchange, she didn't think about her own collapse. Asuna was sitting beside Kirito's bed, humming a lullaby until she fell asleep. Based on the sun shining through the window, it was now evening.

She looked away —— to the empty chair by the bed.

In the midst of her mind, she recalled that until afternoon, Asuna was changing the wet cloth on the forehead constantly. But, seeing Asuna asleep, Kirito probably went out to complete his daily hunting.

"Maa..... there is nothing I can do about it."

She whispered aloud.

Different from Asuna who was associated with a guild, Solo Kirito had no training partners. If he missed one day of hunting, it would require a lot of effort to make up for it. She understood this, but.

To be relied on, that happy and warm feeling, still could not stop the buried feelings of cold loneliness. Her body was obviously hot, but in her chest was an icy coldness, she could not help but let her tears emerge.

"......Aaaa..... This won't do..... as expected."

Tightly closing her eyes, she buried her head into the blanket, just then ——

Suddenly, in the middle of the room a blue vortex shined. As a hum was issued, a two meter high elliptic door appeared.

"......Corridor Crystal."

Her head left the pillow to say these words, when a black figure jumped out of the door.

Of course, this was the Black Swordsman Kirito. And no one else. However ——

"I, I say..... Can't you come in from the main door....."

At this point, Asuna was finally aware, that Kirito had brought something.

It was a large wooden bucket. No, it should be called a basin.

The basin was filled with grains that glowed white, reflecting the light of the afternoon sun.

After looking at it for a few seconds, she finally realized what it was.

"That..... that is, snow.....? But..... where did you get it, in this season?"

After that question, Kirito carefully placed the basin on the table, faced Asuna, and lowered his head.

"I'm sorry, I came back too late! I intended to come back earlier..... it's all because of that tough dragon....."

Kirito's words reminded Asuna of the tall mountain that was full of ice and snow. It was at the top of one of the hills that was located at one end on the fifty eighth floor. However, climbing that mountain required encountering many monsters along the extremely long mountain road, and at the end of the road, the regional boss monster, the Ice Dragon waited. Being able to go there and return in two hours was nothing short of a miracle.

".....Why would you go this far....."

Kirito did not answer Asuna's question, picked up the towel on the table, and put it into the ice basin. Upon taking it out, the towel was completely frozen.

"Lie down."

At these words, Asuna's head returned to the pillow, and the ice cold towel was placed on her forehead. «Frozen towel» produced a cooling sensation much higher than the wet towel.

"Ah..... Comfortable....."

As Asuna smiled and said this, Kirito shyly laughed.

Her forehead obviously felt very cold, yet at the same time she could feel a gentle warmth. Asuna blinked, then stretched out her hand, and held the hand which protruded from the sleeves of the black clothes.

The hand Kirito had used to collect snow had become cold, but after holding tightly for a while the temperature was restored, so Asuna held on tightly.

" I say..... this time I will pass my cold over to you."

The End.

Listening to this, Kirito replied with a bitter smile.

“Then this will have no end.”

“Isn’t that fine? If you collapse again, I will go to collect snow and ice, and make shaved ice for you to eat”

“.....If it is like this, collapsing will not be that bad.”

Maintaining a smiling face, Asuna closed her eyes, and waited for that moment.

(End)

ME-05

Salvia

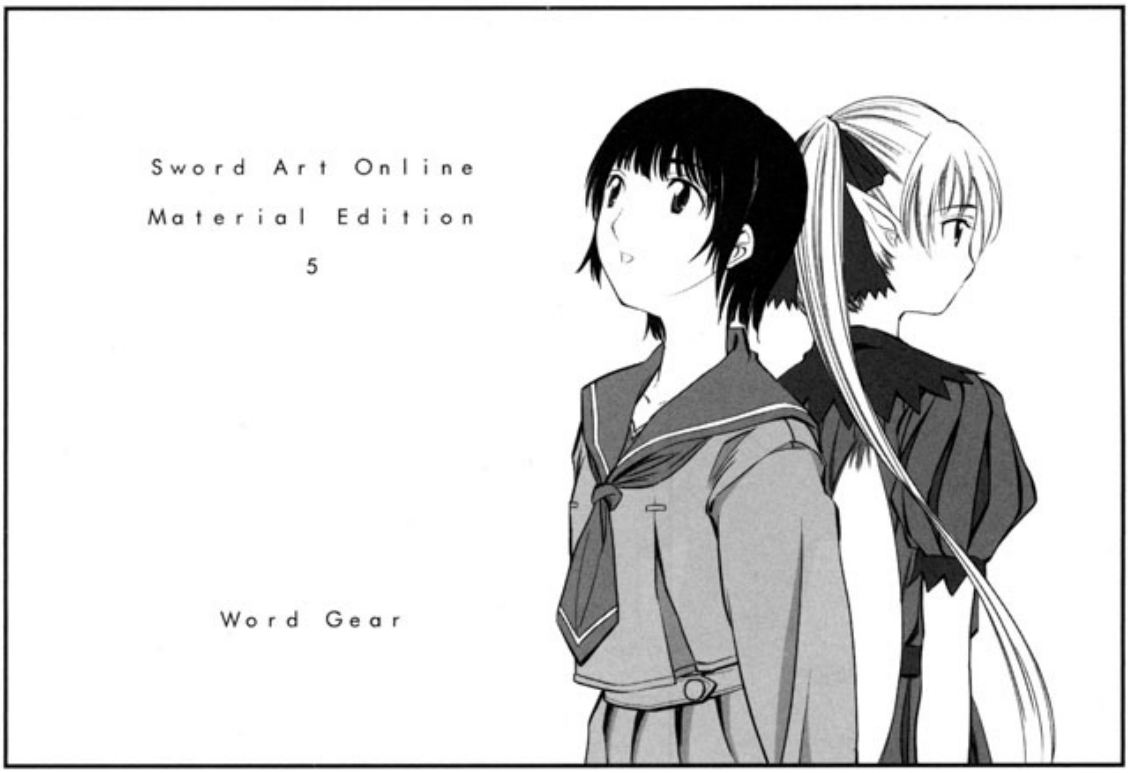
Kawagoe, Saitama
Junuary 2025

〔ソードアート・オンライン：マテリアル・エディション５〕
Salvia

２００９年５月

ついに書き下ろしではなく再録です……。
この『ME5』に収録されている『サルビア』という短編小説は、
おそらく2004年あたりにホームページ掲載用に書かれて
その後取り下げとなったものです。当時の記憶はかなり
曖昧ですが、たしか友人と「子供の頃サルビアの蜜吸った
ことある？ない？」という話になり、私はナイ派でしたので、
ならばどれくらいの方がその経験があるかアンケート取って
みようということになって、回答のお礼として書かれた短編
だったように思います。
アンケートの結果は、全国津々浦々で皆様吸ってらっしゃい
ました！　あと少数ながらツツジ派の方も！

そんなわけですので小説の内容は、これもまったく何てこと
のない、いつものキリト氏と直葉さんです。



“I’m at my limit already~”

Glancing at the side of Kazuto’s face who leaked the complaints in a miserable voice, Suguha tried not to laugh and raised her voice,

“Not yet! Only 20 more!”

Two people continued swinging their shinai in the harsh cold weather of the morning. For Kazuto, swinging 300 times every morning is still very tough. Despite saying ‘Can’t~’ or ‘I’m dying~’ every few minutes, he still continued until the end. His willpower is what Suguha always looked up to.

“298, ...299, ...OK, finish~”

“My arms.....I can’t feel my arms.....”

This morning Kazuto somehow finished swinging too, after passing the shinai to Suguha, he walked to the veranda and lay on top of the plank. Smiling at the scene, Suguha wiped both shinai with a cloth while leaning next to the black pine trunk. She pulled a handkerchief out of her jersey pocket and wiped her sweat, relieving her breath.

A few days ago, the yard was still covered in snow, but it had disappeared completely due to the recent continuous fine weather. Suguha noticed the earth in the planter, which was arranged alongside the graveled path that turns from the yard to the door, was already dry. She then mercilessly said to the dying body at the veranda,

“Onii-chan, fill up that watering can and bring it here~”

Several seconds later, Kazuto lifelessly replied ‘K~~’ and got up, he pulled an old watering can from under the veranda, collected water from the tap at the corner of the yard and handed it to Suguha. She received and tilted it at the planter, fine droplets of water came showering a curved line, accompanied by a light sound.

“.....What is this flower?”

Kazuto asked, squatting and glancing at a small flower with a pale orange color in front of him.

“It’s an Adonis, red chichibu type.”

“Hmm..... So it blooms in this season”

On hearing Suguha’s answer, Kazuto poked a petal of the adonis while deep in thought.

“At our house, this flower blooms the earliest. .....But Onii-chan, why are you interested in the flower?”

“No... It’s just that ‘that side’ also has a similar flower. .....How about this planter? It looks empty.”

“Oh, in that one I’ll sow Salvia seeds when spring arrives, then they will bloom in the summer.”

“Salvia..... what kind of flower is that?”

Finishing the watering, Suguha showered the remaining water in the can at the base of black pine, then answered with a surprised voice,

"It bloomed every year didn't it? It's red and when blooming, they look like many small goldfish. Onii-chan, when we were young, you always removed the flower to taste its nectar and caused mother to get angry every time."

Upon hearing, Kazuto face started showing signs of amazement.

"N..Nectar!? Did I really do such a survivor-like thing.....?"

"Ah—— you already forgot about it. I was sad my share was gone too."

".....My share?"

"Ah....."

Realizing she inadvertently said an unnecessary thing, Suguha shrugged and stuck out her tongue.

"Wait..... now I remember....."

The grin floated onto Kazuto's face.

"The one mother was angry at wasn't me but you, Sugu. I think she said 'Didn't we agree no more than 3 per day?'"

"Haha, caught me, you remembered it so well. Even these days it is still a mystery to me how sweet the nectar from Salvia is."

"Hmm, I can't remember the taste....."

Kazuto aimlessly glanced at the space in front of him while searching through the bottom of his memories——

"Ah—....."

He stood still but his eyes suddenly went wide open.

"......? What is it, Onii-chan"

"No.....that's right.....come to think of it....."

Suguha looked up worriedly at the Kazuto's face, who muttered words she couldn't understand. Suddenly, he closed the distance between them while looking into her eyes. Suguha's heart throbbed, trying to hide her hot cheeks, she hastily jumped a step backward.

"W..What? Don't surprise me like that"

".....Sugu, do you have time now?"

"Eh? .....There's no class today, so it's alright, but why.....?"

"Well then, let's go out for a bit"

Kazuto grabbed Suguha's arm, who was still unable to grasp the situation, and walked quickly toward the eaves of the main building.

"W..Wait, where are we going?"

"Don't ask yet, just sit on the back seat"

He pulled out his mountain bike and removed the number lock attached to it.

"Eh—, I'm still in this outfit, it's a bit....."

Suguha complained while looking down at her green school jersey, but Kazuto just smiled and said,

"That is appropriate for the roadwork anyway."

"They use cooler looking jerseys for that! .....It really can't be helped then..."

After saying her point, she sat down on the rear carrier of MTB with her arms wrapped around Kazuto's waist and clung on tightly. She began to worry that he would hear the sound of her heart which was currently beating like an alarm bell.

"Hold on tight!"

When Kazuto forcefully stepped on the pedals, the sound of the wind put her thoughts to rest and the back wheel kicked a pebble, causing a small sound. The MTB started gaining momentum, and once it went past the front gate, began to run.

It was already past eight, being a weekday, there were lines of people walking on the road outside of the station. But the bicycle that both were riding on headed in the opposite direction from the flow. Suguha felt the people they passed were smiling at the siblings, she buried her face behind Kazuto's back and quietly said,

"T..This is embarrassing, Onii-chan! How much further are we're going?"

"Won't be too far..... probably....."

"Probably—!?"

The bicycle went on steadily until the outskirts of the residential area, even though the rear carrier was made of metal, sitting was comfortable because the MTB's tire was attached to a thick suspension.

It was around ten minutes on the bicycle when they reached the back of a small shrine, Kazuto put on the brakes. They were at a corner of an old residential area, by then it was already quiet without pedestrian traffic.

“.....Here?”

“.....”

There was no answer to her question, Kazuto got off the bike, Suguha also jumped off the rear carrier. She put her hands on her hips and said,

“.....Now, explain it properly already, is there anything at this shrine?”

“.....”

Surely this lonely shrine must be Kazuto’s destination. Just as she thought that, Kazuto crossed the road to the opposite side of the shrine. There stood the gate to a solitary luxurious house.

“.....? Is this the house of your acquaintance?”

Suguha stood next to him, the house exterior was built with tiles of red bricks, palisade painted in white enclosed a large garden which was covered in color of dried straw. There was a small child who was waiting for its parents on a red tricycle.

Suguha looked up to Kazuto’s face, wanting to ask her question again, but eventually, he shook his head slowly.

“No..... I don’t know this house. But here..... It was a wide vacant lot and it was full of grass.

Phew, he breathed loudly with a slight smile.

“.....Well.....It was from seven, or eight years ago anyway.....”

“Vacant lot.....? Is there something at that place.....?”

“Nope, nothing..... Well, let’s go back.”

“I don’t understand, we came all the way to this place just to look for a vacant lot—?”

After self-concluding, he turned back, Kazuto shrugged and started walking to the bicycle. Suguha watched his back and when she was about to follow him——

“Ah.....”

A bright blue scene had filled her vision.

One corner of the lawn was enclosed with bricks, it was a small flower bed. In the middle was cold resistant plants spread with deep green leaves, and hidden within —— there was a dense short grass with a large amount of blooming small blue flowers.

“.....It’s the Salvia.”

“.....Eh?”

Suguha’s voice reached Kazuto, who was looking at the flower bed next to him.

“Salvia..... Where is it?”

“Here, the blue flowers.”

“But..... Sugu said earlier it’s a red flower?”

“There are hundreds of species within the Salvia genus, this one is a Blue Salvia species. But, it’s strange.....”

When Suguha tilted her head, the back door of the big house opened. A young lady wearing an apron came out, her long hair was tied in a pony tail, in her hands was a shiny tin watering can.

The lady expanded her eyes a little when she saw the siblings, she then immediately smiled while approaching them and said,

“Good morning”

“Ah.. G..Good morning”

The siblings hastily returned greetings.

“Are you two from the neighborhood?”

“Y..Yes”

“Is there anything I could help?”

“Er..Erm... well.....”

Blocked in front of Kazuto who struggled with his words, Suguha quickly said,

“I think these Salvia are very beautiful!”

“Is that so? Well, thank you.”

The lady smiled cheerfully, Suguha continued saying with relief,

“But.....normally Salvia won’t be blooming past December, right? Are these a special kind?”

“Ah..... I also think it’s strange. Even though they’re a perennial plant, in November every year the flowers would already start to fall off, but this year even past new year, the flowers are still there..... Unfortunately, I don’t know if these are normal Blue Salvia or not.....”

“Don’t know.....?”

“These Salvia were already here before my house was even built, during the construction we had to move them slightly. But every year after that they are still blooming healthily here.”

“I..Is that so?”

Suddenly Kazuto shouted, causing Suguha and the lady to be surprised.

“W..What is it, Onii-chan.”

“Ah, well....”

Kazuto hesitated for a bit, then timidly said,

“.....The one who sowed these Salvia was me, ...seven years ago.....”

“E..Eh!?”

“Oh, really!”

Suguha was astonished upon hearing an unexpected answer while the lady who embraced the watering can at her chest wore a big smile on her face.

“Is that so, then these flowers must have been waiting for you. Ah.....wait a moment.”

The lady hunched to put the watering can down, then walked quickly into the house. In a short while the figure reappeared with a small shovel in her right hand, she lowered the white plastic pot in her left hand to the ground.

While Suguha and Kazuto were watching, the lady dug the shovel into one corner of the Blue Salvia bunch and carefully pulled three

stumps out, then put them into the flowerpot. She brought a vinyl bag from her apron pocket and put the flowerpot into it. With a smiling face and both hands holding the bag, she offered it to Kazuto.

"Let's split it, please take this."

"Ah.....No, it's too much....."

"It's alright, the flowers will surely be delighted too."

".....Thank you very much. Then I'll accept your kind offer....."

Kazuto lowered his head while accepting the bag. The contents shook slightly and Suguha's nose was tickled by a faint aroma.

"Well then, feel free to visit anytime. In spring there will be a lot more blooming."

"OK, now we must be going"

Kazuto bowed his head again to the lady who began to scatter water with the watering can, then began walking.

"Well, Sugu, let's go back."

"O..Ok. .....Good bye"

Still not understanding the situation, Suguha bowed and followed Kazuto.

Kazuto didn't ride the bicycle, instead he pulled it with one hand and started walking. Next to him, filled with curiosity, Suguha quickly asked him,

"Wait, Onii-chan, what's going on? You really planted those!?"

“Ah—, how to say it.....”

Kazuto stopped the bicycle in front of the stone steps after walking half a circle around the shrine perimeter. His face went slightly red, ‘Ah~’, ‘Uu~’, cleared his throat with ‘Ahem ahem’, then he suddenly offered the bag in his right hand to Suguha.

“Sugu, your birthday present.”

“Hah!? .....It’s not my birthday yet though?”

“It’s from seven years ago.”

Still not understanding, Suguha tilted her head while her glance was filled with questions.

“.....Seven years ago..... On Sugu’s birthday. You wished to gather a lot of Salvia to get its nectar, so I bought some seeds with my allowance and planted them at that vacant lot. But later I couldn’t find the road to the shrine, I spent a while searching and eventually gave up. At that time I was very sad..... Then, this time I found it in one go. A child’s memory is really unreliable.”

“Onii-chan.....”

Suguha’s eyes opened wide, she shyly averted her gaze from Kazuto’s face. Her chest felt tight with the various emotions that had overflown within her heart.

Stretching out her right hand, she gently pulled a Salvia flower which peeped out from the bag’s opening. She received the droplet that came off from its base with the tip of her tongue. It was faint, but the vivid sweetness quickly spread inside her mouth —— At that moment, Suguha felt the flow of the many years of time she spent with Kazuto breeze through her. Before she realized it, two

streaks of tears had already flowed passed her cheeks and dropped to her feet.

“O..Oi, don’t suddenly cry.....”

Suguha jumped into Kazuto’s chest, who had faltered due to sudden panicking. Both hands wrapped around his back, she embraced him with all her strength. Before long, she felt Kazuto caress her head gently. Cheeks still pressed on to Kazuto’s chest, she whispered quietly while the sweetness was still lingering in her mouth,

“I love you.....Onii-chan.”

(END)

Algade Showdown

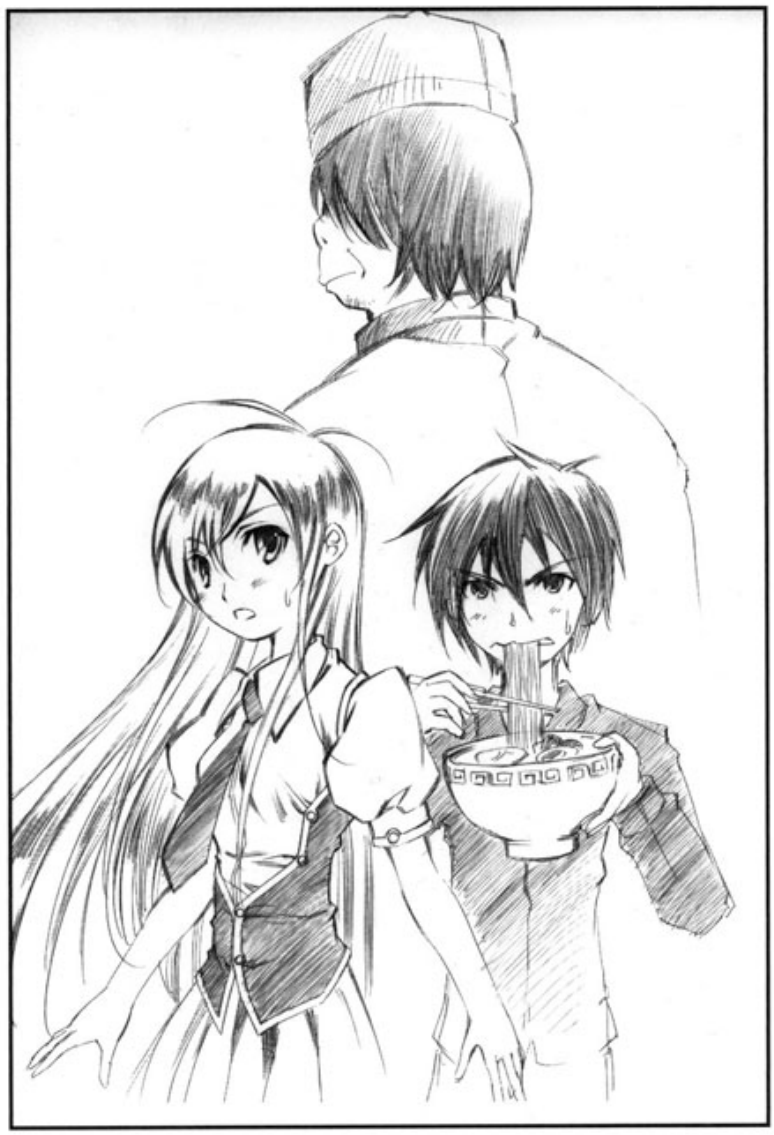
Aincrad 22nd Floor
October 2024

〔ソードアート・オンライン：マテリアル・エディション６〕
アルゲードの決闘

２００９年１１月

この短編はたしかイベント用書下ろしだったと記憶しています。内容は、サイトで連載したSAO外伝『圏内事件』の後日談であり、現在もサイトに掲載されたままなので、この本に収録するかどうかやや迷ったのですがいちおう既刊の『ME』全収録を謳いましたので載せることにしました。

内容は、いつものキリト氏とアスナさん……ですが、SAOとしては珍しくギャグ寄りの内容です。アインクラッドの食事情も含めてお楽しみ頂けると嬉しいです。



On a certain evening, a few days after the newly married life of Asuna and I begun, in the log house inside the deep forests on Aincrad's 22nd floor.

While talking about places visited during the day or eaten dishes, on the sofa which was placed in front of the fireplace, Asuna suddenly said what she was thinking aloud.

"Hey, Kirito-kun. I think, maybe that person wasn't an NPC but a player....."

"....Haa?"

Not understanding her sudden topic, my mouth was left slightly opened.

While sitting side by side on the sofa, her lips continued to sip from her tea cup.

"Well, that shop's master, I naturally believed he was an NPC without a doubt..... But today, somehow, while I was watching his face, I suddenly felt that that person is actually a player."

The subject of our conversation was a restaurant. It was located deep within the back of the back and even further back of the lower part of the 50th floor's main block town «Algade». If we were to go there without a map, not just arriving at the destination, coming back out would be difficult. Actually «restaurant» was not an appropriate word to describe it, «Food Shop» would be more suitable. Its name was «Algade House».

The building looked as if it would collapse if it was blown by a somewhat strong wind. There was a sign curtain hung at the sliding door entrance. The interior had a stone floor —— or rather a bare concrete floor, there were two 4-seat-tables and another four seats at the counter. All the furniture had a strong presence of cheapness, and it wasn't like they were specially ordered to make them cheap either.

In the menu, there were only 3 entries. «Algade Soba», «Algade Grilled» and «Algade Boiled», none of them had any motivation behind their naming. They were, in the menu order, a ramen which didn't look like a ramen, an okonomiyaki which didn't look like an okonomiyaki, and last one, I still don't have any idea what it is supposed to be.

The order was then cooked by the same shopkeeper. While Asuna was saying «that shop's master», My mind imagined the short master with a white smock and a white toque, whose round face of unknown age was hidden behind the long forelock, then I finally replied,

".....P..Player? .....but that person didn't say anything....."

"At least he did say 'Welcome' and 'Thank you'."

"Those are normal for NPC though. .....actually if you target him with the cursor....."

Saying up to this point, I noticed something.

There is a definite distinction between a player and an NPC, focusing the gaze on the target will bring up the «Color Cursor». Although both types would appear in green, for an NPC, under the

HP bar will be a clearly displayed 【NPC】. But this distinction method wouldn't work inside the shop, as it was classified as inside a building, due to the consideration of the system. It is probably impossible to eat quietly if the cursor kept appearing whenever someone is seen, so even if I focus my gaze on the store's master, the cursor wouldn't appear.

But, normally nobody cares about determining an NPC, because they are so obvious with just a glance. Unlike flesh and blood humans operating through the Nerve Gear, system controlled NPCs have unique characteristics. Being imprisoned inside SAO for two years, it was a no-brainer to know if other people are a player or an NPC without even thinking —— while I thought about that, my brain re-checked the master of Algade House's gloomy standing pose.

Then, my eyes opened wide in amazement.

".....This is bad, somehow I can't be sure."

".....Right?"

Asuna smiled happily for some reason.

Her smile, which hasn't changed since we first met, shot through my heart, whenever this happens, I always stretch my hand out dizzily to reach her. But this time, the face of the master that had been floating in my brain prevented my action.

I scratched my head to push that unpleasant image out of my mind.

"No, but is it even possible that someone can't be identified whether they are a player or an NPC? I'm sure there must be a simple way to check it....."

"How about checking his reaction after being attacked? But once we use various reckless methods and he turns out to be a player, we won't be able to go back to that shop anymore. .....Well, at this point, I don't think I want to go back there anyway."

"No, I'm bothered, really bothered."

Asuna quickly shook her head and sighed.

".....Kirito-kun, what on earth do you like about that shop? It's been half a year since you brought me there the first time, I really don't understand....."

"About that, I don't know the reason myself. Unfriendly atmosphere, bad food..... but occasionally I can't resist the urge to try that mystery ramen again."

"That was not ramen though, ...Well, why not just ask? Are you an NPC or a player, like that"

Already having considered Asuna's idea several seconds ago, I shook my head.

"Nope, it won't work. That shopkeeper's unfriendliness is like ten Heathcliffs together. I'm absolutely certain the question will be ignored. Well, that place was also a good place too.

"R..Really, ...just leave it as a mystery then. I'm sorry for starting the weird topic, Do you want more cookies?"

After saying that, Asuna stood up, but I quickly grabbed her left hand and pulled her back.

".....No, I can't leave it."

"Eh?"

“Feeling anxious over and over like this will become unbearable, I can’t go back to the front lines until I know whether the shopkeeper is human or NPC.”

Upon hearing that, ‘Don’t say something like that!’ was clearly showed in Asuna’s expression, but she sat down again without saying it out.

“.....But, then what should we do? I don’t know any way to confirm it, and asking is also out of the question, right?”

“Nope, there is a way. In short, just seeing the cursor when that master is outside the shop is enough. For a player, he would surely need to go out to buy food ingredients, while NPC also have specific behaviors like cleaning the outside of the shop too.”

“.....Y..You don’t mean...”

Asuna made a stiff face and tried to walk away from the sofa again, but I grabbed both her shoulders and said,

“OK, tomorrow let’s go camp there at six in the morning. There is an empty passage across the street, it won’t raise any suspicion if we observe from there.”

“.....It’s cold, surely, very cold.”

“Yes, we need cold resistant equipment! I’m sure we have enough for both of us in the storage, then the boxed lunch will be made using cold resistance boosting ingredients too. The preparation is now flawless, I’ll leave it to you Asuna!”

To my words that gushed out, Asuna made a very complex face then responded with ‘Oh~’. But enthusiasm seemed missing from her words for some reason.

Next day.

While it was still dark, wearing thick fur cloaks, we entered our observation position on the pedestrian bridge across from the Algade House's eaves.

Six hours later.

We were forced to retreat after realizing our prospect bore no fruit.

".....He didn't come out at all, did he!"

At an open cafe along the main street, Asuna complained after quickly drinking hot milk and placing the empty cup back on the table.

"Even before that, the sign curtain was left out during the night, and there was no indication of the outside cleaning either. I'm very bothered!"

".....Really sowwy about that."

I first have to apologize on behalf of the shopkeeper.

Algade House's level of lethargy is much higher than anticipated. The shopkeeper never came out to purchase stocks nor clean outside. The only change we observed was the sign plate on the sliding door, which was changed from 【Closed】 to 【Open】 at ten. Of course, just that action on its own wasn't enough to determine if he is a player or an NPC.

".....Hmm, but the food ingredients should eventually run out..... Then he surely has to go out to restock....."

After finishing my mumbling, Asuna replied with a sharp glance toward me,

".....Then, do you really want to wait for that to happen? If you think about it, that shop doesn't even have any customers, how many days will it take for the ingredients to run out? I won't be surprised even if it takes several weeks! I'm not going to do that for sure!"

"S..Sorry....."

I apologized again, then thought desperately.

Something——, there must be a way. A way to confirm whether he is a player or not, without him taking a single step out of the shop.

If we're unable to check the person, how about the shop? Is there any way to determine if the shop is a player's shop or an NPC's shop? It would be clearly a player's action if it stood out among the elegant buildings on the street of Salemburg. But this is Algade, the most chaotic town in Aincrad, there were plenty of similar shady shop once we enter the back streets.

——It was no good. Continuing being in the clearing group for two years in this Aincrad, accepting the alias «Black Swordsman», but unable to distinguish whether that person was a player or an NPC. It was such a laughing matter.

A smile of self-ridicule floated to my face, then —— An idea flashed out in my brain.

"T..... That's it!"

".....What?"

In spite of Asuna's skeptic glance toward me, I rattled on,

"If the ingredients won't deplete, then we'll deplete them ourselves! Listen, for NPC restaurants, the term out of stock doesn't exist to begin with, the food just springs out from the kitchen. But a player's shop is different, the shopkeeper has to purchase the stock or else food can't be made. That means....."

At this point Asuna suddenly rose from the table and tried to escape with a dash.

But my focus on increasing Agility stat displayed its results, her hand was grabbed before she made any distance.

"——We just have to eat it! Anything from that shop's menu!"

"Don't wanna! What if it's an NPC restaurant? An infinite amount of food will just come out, won't it?"

"That's that, then we'll know he's an NPC right? Let's go now! The problem is —— Which one to pick from the menu. «Algade Soba», «Algade Grilled», or «Algade Boiled»..... ——Asuna, what do you like?"

Sub-leader of the guild Knights of the Blood, the rapier user whose title was «The Flash» shot her gaze towards me which would be able to pierce a small hole in the middle of my forehead after hearing my question——.

After a short while, she sat back on the chair and said,

"«Boiled» is absolutely out, ...«Grilled» that sometimes contained strange things is also out."

"Then «Soba» it is. Yeah, it is suitable for this challenge too, because it's also what we ate the first time we went there."

".....That's right, but didn't we invite the guild leader as well back then?"

When I seriously tried to recall it, Asuna immediately shook her head.

"It was a joke. ——Then, when are we going to do it?"

I grinned while standing up, and said,

"Isn't it great, we haven't eaten lunch here."

Several minutes later.

Asuna and I were standing in front of the food shop, which will soon be the battlefield of our one-sided duel.

".....Here we go."

After confirming with the nod from my partner—— My left hand pushed aside the dirtied sign curtain, while my right hand forced open the sliding door.

"Welcome."

The usual greeting voice from inside the counter was by none other than the shopkeeper. I sat at the counter instead of my usual table. As soon as Asuna sat down beside me, I made an order.

"Two Algade Soba."

The shopkeeper prepared the bowls without replying, two mysterious balls of noodle were tossed into the large pot. From

these action, is was still not possible to confirm whether he was a player or not. After a while, the shopkeeper used the long chopsticks to move the eased up noodle to the bowls, hot water switching, which is required in the real world, seems unnecessary here. He placed a thinly sliced meat, a lump of boiled vegetable, and half a boiled egg, then poured the light colored soup into the bowl.

Two bowls had lined up on the counter, a sound effect rang out when I pulled out the soba from my storage.

Both of us took the chopsticks and said 'Itadakimasu' at the same time. It was the start of the first round of the battle.

In regards to Aincrad cuisine, the taste was recreated from the presets of basic taste data, however, with the addition of seasoning, one can customize the taste even further. For example, the Brown Stew, which is Asuna's pride, was made by slightly mixing the spices set into the taste of ready-made sauce. In other word, with the aid of a player's hand, the flavour of the dish could be strengthened, and in most cases, enriched the taste.

——But it would be quite a miraculous to say the «There is not even one taste» feeling from the Algade Soba was from the aid of the player hand. Even if the flavour of the soup had seasoning added, the strength of the taste was like it had been diluted to a different dimension, it was like a drawing which the background was firmly written but the subject didn't exist.

Maybe what pulled me back to this shop was that missing flavour, for the moment one day that this dish will be «Completed», an ephemeral expectation like that —— But of course, I somehow knew that the moment would never come.

As I was deeply indulged in my thoughts, Asuna, whose face had an expression which could be read as 'Why is this happening to me' was beside me. We finished eating at the same time.

I returned empty bowls back to the counter —— then said,

".....Two Algade Soba, refill!"

There was a slight pause in the shopkeeper's action, but it was probably was just my imagination. The round face of the man in his thirties to forties under the long forelock bore no expression at all, the shopkeeper threw two balls of noodles into the large pot.

From that point on, the endless battle of me and Asuna against the master begun.

Of course, no matter what was eaten in Aincrad, there won't be anything entering the stomach in the body of the real world. But the taste reproduction engine tricks the brain, which lead to an unavoidable feeling of 'full'."

To be honest, that feeling already came after the second bowl had emptied, but there was no path for me to retreat.

".....Two Algade Soba, refill"

This full feeling was only a hallucination, the soba was merely digital data. Which meant there was nothing preventing me from eating these forever.

Having fooled myself like that, I finished the third bowl and proceeded to the fourth bowl. There was also Asuna, whom I could always rely on in the big battle, she was at exactly the same pace as me.

——But immediately after she finished the soup from the fifth bowl,

".....Kirito-kun, I'm sorry."

her faint whisper echoed from the emptied bowl.

"I..can't go any further, I'll have to leave the rest to you..... The truth..you must..find..it....."

Her chestnut color hair fluttered, then «The Flash» collapsed on the counter.

——ASUNAaaaaaaaa——!!

Was what I wanted to scream, but doing that might allow the virtual stomach to reverse something back out, so I limited myself to a short 'GJ'.

I lifted my face and glared at the shopkeeper,

".....One Algade Soba.....refill"

I was also near my limit.

For Asuna's sake, I can't be defeated here. But while sipping from the sixth bowl of something which wasn't ramen, I was unable to stop the fear which sprung out inside me.

——Maybe he was really an NPC? After all we had done, the noodles and the soup still sprung out without any pause. Did I challenge him to a fight in which we had no chance of winning?

——No, even if it's the case, it wasn't the time to fall yet. For Asuna.

Seventh bowl.

Eight bowl.

HP bar of my stomach was now in deep red, but the expression of shopkeeper was still unchanged. I slurpped the noodle one by one, while thinking of a way to reverse the flow of the current battle situation.

If it was a real ramen shop, there would be pepper, fish meals, or onions at the counter. It was possible to eat the latter half deliciously by changing the flavour. But this shop had no such wonderful things. There was only one way, with «Algade Boiled» being an exception, it was possible to mix the other two orders together, but doing that would be the same as stopping oneself by stabbing. Why «Boiled»? I once accompanied Klein and we requested that, we both said 'Give up' just after two mouthfuls, it was menu of the legend.

——So is this the end?

Within my fading consciousness, I heard the reviving voice from a distant memory.

The face of Asuna, who was here eating Algade Soba with me at the beginning, said,

"Someday I want to make a soy sauce, otherwise this unpleasant feeling won't ever disappear."

".....!"

My eyes fully opened, and my trembling hand moved to open our shared storage. Scrolling through the enormous item lists, finding the target item.

Once I grabbed what I was looking for, I tilted it over the bowl, a slightly dark liquid poured down and immediately caused the thin yellow color of the soup to change to brown. The drifting fragrance

can't be compared to anything else, the smell that is ingrained at the base of my memory was —— soy sauce. It was the result of Asuna's long research, Aincrad's ultimate seasoning that no one but her could make.

Placing the small bottle down, I held the bowl and sipped large amounts of noodles and soup.

".....This is it."

I murmured with a hoarse voice. It was this taste. The one I was looking for, the completed form of Algade Soba. It had arrived here and now.

If eating this, then no matter how many bowls —— No, maybe I can eat five more bowls, I still can fight!

————At that time.

The words I have never heard within this shop before echoed from overhead.

".....Mister, that, taste it.....can I?"

I raised my confused face, nodded and pushed the bowl to him.

The mystery master grabbed it up and ate the mouthful of noodles and soup together. He looked up for a while after placing the bowl back on the counter——

Soon after that, two lines of tears flowed from behind his long forelock.

".....This is it. This taste... real world's... my shop's taste!"

————So you are a player after all!

————Then act more graciously!

Swallowing what I wanted to scream, I asked,

".....Your shop, where is it located?"

"Hmm, It was at Ogikubo, I got sucked into NetGame so it went out of business. But once the game is cleared and I go back to the other side, I'm going to open a ramen shop again. With this ramen, also «Grilled» and «Boiled» will make the appearance too, come by all means."

Tears still flowing down his face, where was that silent character earlier? While watching the shopkeeper who had gained momentum talking, I collapsed onto the counter.

As my consciousness was fading, My last thought was,

————I won't go, absolutely————

(END)

Continuation: Aria in the Starless Night

§ Aincrad 2nd Floor
4th December 2022

Aincrad's 2nd floor's main town «Urbus» was a town located inside a table mountain that spanned three hundred meters in diameter, which had been dug up and left with only the outer circumference.

Once I had gone through the southern gate, the words [INNER AREA] floated up into my vision, and the slow tempo of the town's BGM started playing. Unlike the music led by string instruments in the town of the first floor, the main theme here was played with a sorrowful oboe tone. The NPCs passing by also had subtle changes in the design of their garments, giving a 『So this is a new floor』 feel.

After walking about ten meters from the gate, I started looking at my surroundings. I couldn't see any green cursor which indicated players at all, but that was only natural. That was because the guardian of the stairs to the second floor, the first floor labyrinth's boss monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord» was just defeated forty minutes previously, and every members of the boss-capturing party aside from me had returned to the base.

In other words, on this vast second floor, the only existing player was just me —— the «Former β tester» and now the «Beater», Kirito.

Although that was the case, this situation wouldn't continue for much longer. That was because exactly two hours after the floor boss' annihilation, the «Transfer Gate» at the center of the main town of the next floor (which was this Urbus) would be automatically [Activated], connecting it to the main town on the

lower floors. At that time, the waiting players would spill over from the gate like a flood.

Conversely, if I wished to, I could spend the remaining hour and twenty minutes monopolizing this town —— as I could clear a few [Slaughter] quests, which I normally had to compete with other players for the [POP], two or three times. It was a very attractive idea to a solo player who ultimately advocated self-interest, however, I didn't have enough courage to seriously anger the several hundreds..... or possibly thousands of people who were eagerly awaiting the activation of the gate.

Therefore, I started jogging along Urbus' main street which went straight towards the north, ascended the wide stairs before arriving at the town square, and finally started walking toward the large gate set up in the center.

It was called a gate, but it was actually just an arch made of neatly stacked up stones. Without a door nor any bars, there was nothing to block the view of its other side. However, upon getting closer, I noticed a faint distortion of the empty space in the middle of the arch, as if seeing through a thin film of water.

As I looked around at the surroundings, confirming an escape route, my right hand stretched slowly towards the swaying transparent veil. The fingertip, which was wrapped by a black leather glove, touched the surface of the water, which spread vertically —— at that moment,

Pa, a dazzling blue light overflowed, and shot into my eyes.

The pulsing light spread in circles within the five-meters-wide arch. Once it had filled the entire space, it would be the opening of the

Transfer Gate, the so-called «Town Opening». However, I turned around without watching this majestic phenomenon. As asserted beforehand, I started a fierce dash to a building, which looked like a church, to the east of the square. After jumping into the entrance and ascending the stairs inside, I put my back at the side of the window on the third floor, and looked down upon the square.

Just then, the inside of the gate shone brightly, and the NPC orchestra stationed at the corner of the square started playing a loud «Opening Fanfare».

After a moment, a rapid stream of numerous players spilled out from the blue light of the gate.

Some people stood inside the square while looking around. Others ran off with a leather map from the information dealer in one hand. And —— there were people who raised their fists and shouting "I'm on the second floor————!!"

During the β Test, there was a total of nine «Town Openings», the scene during those times, of course, was the lines of the raid party members who had defeated the previous floor's boss being bathed in the generous applause and admiration from the players from the lower floors. However, this time the only person who was the «Opener» had already escaped, so the event didn't occur. There was a group of people who were restlessly looking for me, but unfortunately, they wouldn't be able to find my name there.

Why? Several dozen minutes earlier, after defeating the boss, I had made an announcement in front of more than forty raid members that I, «Kirito», wasn't just a mere β Tester. That, I had reached the highest level among the thousand testers, and had accumulated the

most knowledge of the game. And that, I was a «Beater». I didn't want to act so nasty, but it was partly a reaction to avert the hostility from the new players to the former testers; and as a result, currently, my infamy had spread among the highest leveled players at an ultra-high-speed. If I went out of my hiding place, far from receiving congratulatory remarks, it wouldn't be strange to hear boos and jeers. Then, I wasn't confident that I would be able to remain calm like a willow in the wind in that situation.

Therefore, I would have to continue hiding on the third floor of the church until the commotion in the square died down. ——However,

".....Huh?"

I murmured quietly after seeing an unusual event at the square down below.

A female player who had just warped out of the Transfer Gate did not stop, but continued dashing towards the western side of the town. If it was just that, it could be seen as hurrying to the weapon shop or the quest starter NPC, but the problem was the two men who came out of the gate right after her. They took a moment to look around, and once they had spotted the girl, they started rushing toward the same direction. From the look of it, it was «Two guys chasing a girl».

Normally I wouldn't poke my head out and get involved, as this place was within the effective area of the Anti-Criminal Code, but since the one being chased was my acquaintance, the story had changed. Because the one with the golden-brown curly hair and plain leather equipment was the information dealer, «Argo the Rat», there was no mistaking it.

'Selling every information that could be sold', there certainly were people who hated this motto of The Rat, but I couldn't be calmly chasing after them in middle of town in this appearance. After hesitating for a moment, I placed my feet on the frame of the church's window and jumped down onto the roof just below. I quickly dashed with my agility-focused parameter before the players at the square could notice me, and jumped to the roof of the nearby building. I kept going without dropping down to the ground, aiming to the direction Argo and the two guys went. It was possible to do so due to the consistent height of the buildings in Urbus.

I waved my right hand's finger while I was running and called out the main window. After clicking «Tracking» from the skill tab, I selected «Pursuit» on the floated up sub-menu. When I entered the name [Argo] into the input window, pale green illuminated footprints appeared on the road stretching to the right on my lower right vision.

«Pursuit» was a higher skill that could be learned after the proficiency of «Tracking» had increased, this skill which was normally used to raise effectiveness while hunting monsters could also be used to pursue a player whose name is known. However, as my proficiency was still low, the footprints that could be seen were from a minute ago. I hastily chased after the disappearing lines of small shoe soles.

Argo's focus was on speed (AGI), so for her to be unable to shake off the chasing two guys, they must not be ordinary players. Although I didn't see them among the boss raid, their levels should be top-class. In addition, the footprints that went straight along the road toward the west, had exit to the outside through the city gate which was

dug out of the outer rim of the crater. These western plains of Urbus was a dangerous map with large buffalo type monsters roaming about. The situation was getting worse. I bit my lips and rushed into the virtual savanna without stopping my feet.

The wasteland beyond this savanna was still quite risky for my current level to enter alone. But fortunately, the footprints engraved on the thicket were getting more vivid (in other words, Argo had already stopped running), from inside the valley between two small rocky mountains, a familiar voice could be heard.

".....imes I'll still be saying the same-daro! Just this information, no matter how much you offer, I won't sell it-da!"

That coquettish nasal covering the end of the sentence was obviously Argo's voice, but it had thirty percent more intimidating than usual. It was then followed by a sharp voice of a man.

"You aren't going to keep it to yourself, but also don't want to share it to the public. Doesn't that mean you want to jack up the price-gozaru?"

————*Gozaru?* I frowned as I stopped my feet before climbing up the nearby cliff. In SAO, by using brain and stubbornness, there were many ways to get through the terrain which looked impossible to trespass at first glance. My ambition was, one day, I want to try climbing the outer wall of this floating castle to reach the next floor. But at the moment, the reason I was climbing this mountain to get into their blind spot wasn't for challenge, but for my own safety.

After climbing up for about five meters and reaching a flat, narrow surface, I continued to crawl forward. The general source of the quarrel was right below at that moment.

"It's not a problem about price-yo! Didn't I tell you I don't want to be blamed after I sold the information-da!!"

The voice of the second man then retorted Argo's words,

"Why would we blame you!? No matter what price you ask, we'd still be saying gratitudes-gozaru!! So just sell us the information about the quest hidden on this floor —— the acquisition quest for the «Extra Skill» already!!"

.....Huh?

I completely stopped the breath I was suppressing. Those extra skills that wouldn't appear in the skill tree unless some special conditions were met, the so-called «Hidden Skills». The only one I discovered during the β period was «Meditation», a mental concentration skill (the pose looked like so) that increased the rate of HP recovery and reduced the remaining time of negative statuses. However, due to its low efficiency and lame pose, not many players took it. The other was the «Katana» extra skill, which was used by the Kobold Lord and samurai type monsters on the tenth floor, but I still didn't know its prerequisites.

In any case, I was certain that the topic between Argo and the two mysterious gozaru guys wasn't the «Meditation» skill, as the NPC giving this skill was on the sixth floor. That meant, there was a flag quest to unlock an extra skill that I still didn't know of (also equaled to all former β testers not knowing about it) on this second floor, and these gozaru guys were trying to make Argo sell the information —— something like that?

Once I had reached that conclusion, the volume of the guys' voice increased.

"Today, we will absolutely pull it off for sure-gozaru!"

"We'll certainly do anything necessary to complete that extra skill-gozaru!"

"You guys just won't understand-na—! No matter what you say, I won't sell that information-goza..... oops, I won't sell it-dayo!!"

Piri — the voltage of the tension in the air seemed to have increased a step higher —— the moment I thought so, I stood up on the stone ledge and jumped to the ground five meters below. I landed in the middle between Argo and the two guys. In order to receive no damage for jumping from that height while still lacking in the agility parameter, I bent my knees and took a defensive posture to absorb the impact damage before quickly standing up.

"——Who are you-gozaru!?"

"Spy from another clan!?"

Just when I saw the shape of the gozaru guys, who were shouting at the same time, a corner of my memories was intensely stimulated. Their entire body were in dark grey cloth armor. It seemed they wore light chain mails on their upper bodies. The weapons on their back were small sized scimitars. On their heads were bandana caps and the pirate masks of the same grey color. Overall looking, it was the so-called «Ninja» appearance, which was originality and ingenuity reproduced.

"Hmm, eeh..... you guys are probably, Fu, Fuu.....Food, no, Fooga, but that also doesn't sound right....."

"It's Fūma-gozaru!!"

"We are Kotarou and Isuke from the guild «Fūmaningun»-gozaru!!"

“Oh, that’s it!”

I snapped my right fingers in satisfaction as they had helped supplementing my memory. These two were the members of the ridiculously fastest ninja guild which was feared during the β test period. I should make a note about what was feared first. Every member were just like Argo and focused their parameter on agility, they would open the battle as the front row and used their AGI wall to confuse the enemy. When it became dangerous, they would use their dashing power to flee, forcing the monster to target nearby parties instead. No matter how I thought about them, they were clearly a group of evil shinobi.

But I didn’t know these guys were still going along the ninja path even after SAO official service turned into a death game, which by itself (so far), I had no complaints. However, two vs one, chasing Argo, a female player, and forcefully getting information from her, was a different story.

I made a gesture for Argo, who was behind me, to step back, and moved my finger to the grip of my beloved sword «Anneal Blade +6» hung on my back, as I said,

“As a secret agent of the government, I can’t overlook this misdeed of the Fūma ninja...”

At that moment——

Under the fake ninja cowls, eyes of Kotarou-shi and Isuke-shi shone brightly together.

““You bastard, are you from Iga!?““

“Hah!?”

Apparently, the speech which I thought was appropriate to the mood seemed to have pressed their important switch. Their right hands started to reach, in perfect synchronization, for the ninja katanas on their back (which were actually the small sized scimitars).

No way —— are they really unsheathing? But here is the «Outside» with no Anti-Criminal Code, where Players can attack other players and HP would decrease for real. At the same time, the color cursor of the attacking side would turn orange, indicating a «Criminal» status, preventing them from entering towns. Even if they were ninja, they wouldn't be able to deceive the eyes of the «Cardinal System» controlling this world.

Should I say I'm not Iga but Koga? But would that help avoiding the problem? As I was seriously pondering these ridiculous thoughts——

The solution to the situation came from an unexpected direction.

A while ago, in order to listen to the conversation between Argo and these ninja, I didn't stop at the entrance of this small valley but instead struggled to climb up the cliff. The reason was, this place wasn't in the middle of the town but a field. If one were to stand still in one place, sooner or later, one thing would surely happen.

As I slowly stepped backward, I said in a low voice,

"Behind you."

""Do you think we will fall for that trick-gozaru!?""

"There's no trick, just look behind you."

Something within my voice seemed to have moved the deep skepticism of the ninja. Kotarou and Isuke, who turned their faces

around, made a slight jump at the same time. That was because in front of their eyes and noses, a new intruding person —— no, an intruding cow was standing tall. Its formal name was «Trembling Ox». The height to its shoulders would be about two and a half meters, it was a huge cow type monster, specialty of the second floor. While its toughness and attack power were just as expected from its appearance, what was troublesome was actually its terribly long targeting range and duration, which made it very hard to switch targets mid-fight. Since I had already retreated to the ledge, there was no doubt that its target would be none other than those guys.

"Bumooo————!!"

The cow howled,

""Go.....gozaruuuuu!!""

Which followed by the screams of the ninja. Right after that, the two bodies in ninja outfits started running at an amazing speed in the direction of the town. The cow also chased after them with an agility that did not match its huge body. It was only five seconds before the earth's tremor and the screams disappeared into the horizon. From the look of it, the chase would continue until Kotarou and Isuke entered Urbus.

I, who had somehow avoided the outburst of a big battle against those super ninja, let out my breath while looking over my appearance. Up until an hour ago, I have been dressed in a very plain dark grey leather coat over a cotton shirt and black leather pants. But the unique equipment I obtained as a drop from the Kobold Lord, the boss of the first floor, the «Coat of Midnight»

which I equipped on the spot, along with my eyes and hair color, had made my whole body look pitch black. I think it was valid that I was given the title «Dirty Beater», but at the same time, I somehow looked ninja-like as well. *From now on, it would be unbearable if the "Kirito is from Iga." rumour is spread out, should I at least change the inner color?* —— was what I thought.

Again, an unexpected event occurred.

Two small arms stretching from behind embraced me tightly. I could feel a soft and warm sense of touch on my back, along with a faint whisper,

".....You're pretty cool-yo, Kiri-bou."

That voice was, of course, from Argo who was staying silent until this moment. However, the tone of her voice was subtly different from the «Rat»'s usual slightly hateful tone——

"But something like that, isn't it breaking the first rule of Onee-san, the information dealer?"

.....O-Onee-san? .....The rules of the information dealer?

Those words provoked my curiosity, but the situation wasn't something to which I, a second-year middle school gamer who had zero intercommunication skill until a month ago, could make a correct reaction. I desperately thought while I was freezing, and somehow managed to push the words out of my mouth,

".....You owe me one anyway. I'll be troubled until you tell me the reason behind your whiskers."

On the face of the information dealer, Argo the «Rat», there were three lines of whiskers on each cheeks clearly drawn in black

makeup. While those were the source of her Rat nickname, no one knew the reason behind why she drew them. And a terrible price tag of hundred thousands of coll was attached to that information.

However, in the boss battle earlier, I took a «Beater» label to isolate myself from most of the former β testers, single-handedly taking the hostility from the new players off the former testers including Argo. In order to express her gratitude, Argo sent a message saying that I could «Get any single information for free», to which I replied «Tell me the reason for your whiskers».

To my words that I used as a joke to divert the situation, Argo pressed her face harder on my back as she whispered,

".....Okay-yo, I'll tell you-ru. But you need to wait a bit while I take off the makeup-ra....."

Eh?

Makeup..... does it mean taking those whiskers off? Does she intend to show me the face without makeup which no one had seen before? Does it have some deep implication?

As my mental burden had increased to the crisis level, Argo exclaimed before she separated her body from me,

".....Thinking again, I'll change the information I'm telling! I'll tell you about about the skill hidden on this floor!!"

Argo took her face away from my back and turned in front of me, fortunately —— it should be said like that, the whiskers still clearly remained on her cheeks. Just before her face left my back, 'Kii-bou,

you coward,' I felt like I heard something like that, but it must be my imagination.

The «Rat», who had completely returned to her usual cheeky expression, said while folding her arms,

"I said I'll tell you any information, so I'll keep my promise-yo. But, Kii-bou also have to promise me one thing-shiro. Regardless of the outcome, don't blame me-na!"

".....Just now, you also said that to those ninja. But, what does that mean? For you to sell the information about an extra skill no one knows, wouldn't they feel grateful instead of a grudge.....?"

To my question, the Rat showed a broad grin.

"To answer that, I'll need to take yours as a payment-yo, Kii-bou."

I leaked out a sigh as I nodded.

"Alright, I promise. I swear to the god..... no, to Cardinal-sama, that no matter what happens, I won't hold a grudge against you."

Whether the quest to acquire the extra skill could pose a risk to my life, I would have to judge it by myself. After hearing my oath, Argo gave a deep nod, 'Now follow me-na,' before turning around.

For the path we took from there, I felt it would be impossible to travel along without having bought a map beforehand, or having unlimited amounts of curiosity and endurance. We clambered the cliff of the table mountains standing close together on the vast —— the diameter shouldn't be different from the first floor —— second floor, got into a small cave, and glided along the underground stream like it was a waterslide. We went through three battles, but the enemies weren't difficult to me, who was leveling to the limit in

order to defeat the first floor's boss. The total time of our traveling was about thirty minutes.

Judging by our position on the whole map, we had arrived at a place near the summit of an exceptionally high towering mountain on the southern edge of the second floor. That place was a small clearing surrounded by cliffs, with a spring and a lone tree, also —— a small hut was built there.

".....Is it here?"

Argo nodded at my unnecessary question before walking to the hut without hesitation. It seemed there was still no danger at this stage. She then forcefully opened the door.

There was an NPC inside, along with some furniture. It was a big middle-aged man with a well built body, his head was a slick skinhead, and around his mouth was a thick beard. Over his head was a gold-colored [**?**] mark, indicating a quest starting point.

To my questioning gaze, Argo gave a nod again.

"This guy is the NPC giving the «Martial Arts» extra skill-yo. The information I can give is up until this point, accepting the quest or not, is Kii-bou's decision-na."

".....M-Martial arts?"

It was a name that I had never heard during the β period. Argo said 'This is service-yo,' before adding supplementary information.

"«Martial Arts» is a skill that allows attacking with bare hands..... that is my speculation. It would be effective when the weapon is dropped, or its durability is at the limit-na."

"O-Oh..... then it would be useful, unlike «Meditation». In that case..... I see, so that's why you got stuck with those ninja at that place....."

To Argo, who had ? written on her face, I also gave a 'This is service,' preface before giving an explanation.

"When speaking about ninja, normally you would imagine their weapons to be ninja katana and shuriken, but it was a bit different in game industry. Removing the head with a single bare hand attack. That has been the highest peak of ninja gaming style for a long time. So Kotarou and Isuke would want that martial arts skill in order to make their ninja being «Complete». ——No, but... wait a sec. They didn't know this place, then how did they know about the content of the martial arts skill and Argo knowing that information?"

"This is service of the service-yo. Just before the end of the β test, this information was revealed from an NPC on the seventh floor, regarding «The martial arts master on the second floor»-da. But I found it out myself long before that-na. Those ninja should have heard about it from the NPC on the seventh floor during the β-sa. Then, ever since this official server launched, they have kept asking me to sell the information about the extra skill on the second floor-da."

"T.....Then, why don't you just say『I don't know』at that time? So they wouldn't keep haunting you like that....."

To my expected question, Argo made an awkward face as she said,

".....That single『I don't know』would destroy my pride as an information dealer."

".....So you chose to say『I know but won't sell it』, huh. Well..... it's not like I can't understand your feelings....."

As I let out a sigh, I looked at the NPC setup in seated Zen meditation over a tatami-mat in the middle of the hut again.

".....And, the reason you won't sell is that the one who bought it would hold a grudge against you. But even saying so, don't you already have a lot of enemies due to your business.....?"

"People usually forget the grudge from having bought information just after three days-sa! But this guy is different-da! Even if it turns out to be lame, you still have to keep it for your whole life-yo....."

Watching small body of Argo trembling, I was lost for several seconds before giving a nod.

"I already knew I'd need to experience it by myself anyway. So it's fine, I promise. No matter what the outcome, I won't blame Argo."

I then walked into the hut and stood in front of the old man who was sitting in Zen meditation. The old man in a rugged Tao outfit looked at me before saying,

"Thou wishes to be a disciple?"

".....Yes."

"Even though there be a long and steep road of training?"

"I'm expecting no less."

After a short conversation, the [?] above the head of the old man changed into [!], the log in my vision indicated that the quest was accepted.

The old man, who became my master, moved outside the hut, toward a huge rock at the edge of the garden, which was surrounded by cliffs. Its height was about two meters, with a diameter of about one and a half meters, the master lightly knocked it and spoke while he was stroking his beard with his left hand,

"Thine training is just one. Splitting this rock using only thy palms. Once thou have succeeded, I shall teach thee all my knowledge."

".....W-Wait a bit."

I tapped lightly on the huge rock, feeling a little nervous about this unexpected development. Since I was accustomed to the game, my sense of touch could tell the degree of the target's durability. The hardness sensation that was transmitted to my hand was just one step short of «Immortal Object».

Yeah, it's impossible.

I made that judgement and turned to the master to cancel the quest. However, before I could do so——

"Until this rock is split, leaving this mountain is forbidden. And thou hast to demonstrate it in front of me."

The master who spitted out that line took strange objects from the bosom of his Tao outfit. On his left hand was a small pot. Then in his right hand was... a thick and elegant —— writing brush.

Bad feeling, a word made up in a 3D font floated over my head as the bad feeling pierced through my entire body.

E-Err, I want to quit!

Faster than I could say that, the right hand of the master flashed at an amazing speed. The tip of the brush plunged into the pot, a lot of ink then —— *Zubazubazuba—!* exploded on my face.

At that moment, this made me realize the secret behind Argo's whiskers.

That girl had discovered the old man from the early stage of the β test and had accepted the quest. Upon accepting it, she was told to split the same rock, and at the same time, the graffiti was written on her face. Those —— three whiskers on each cheek.

"O-Owaaaa!?"

I raised a pathetic scream as I leaned back, and met with the gaze from Argo who was standing slightly further away. The girl showed deep sorrow and sympathy —— but at the same time, the expression on the Rat's face looked as if she was trying to suppress the urge to burst into laughter.

I hurriedly used both of my hands to wipe my face after the release of the brush attack. However, the ink seemed to be a super-fast drying type, as I couldn't get anything on my hands. The master looked at me like that before nodding, and spitting out the shocking words that I was expecting,

"That «Mark» cannot be removed until thou hath split this rock and finished the training. I believe in thee, my disciple."

Then, he returned to the hut and disappeared behind the door.

I stood still like that for about ten seconds, before gazing at Argo, who was still wearing a faint expression, and asked,

"I see..... Argo, you accepted this quest during the β period..... and gave up on clearing it, right? That's why you had to continue playing with that drawing on your face until the final day of the test. And as the result, it was the beginning of the «Rat» character, the information dealer, and for your business in the game's official version, you chose to continue using it with makeup..... is that correct?"

"Excellent! That's an excellent reasoning-yo!"

As she clapped her hands, the Rat continued,

"Isn't it great-na, Kii-bou! As a result, you gained the information of both «The reason behind the whiskers» and «The extra skill»-na! For celebration, I'll tell you one more thing-yo. This rock..... it's a demon-dayo!"

".....I thought so..."

While I was bearing the urge to collapse to the ground, I bet on my small ray of hope as I asked Argo,

".....Hey. Is the one on my face similar to your whiskers?"

"Hmm, it's quite different-na—"

"Oh..... h-how does it look!?"

Maybe it isn't too noticeable? Or if it's noticeable but is somewhat cool then I still have a choice of returning to my daily life while carrying this mark. Argo spent three seconds looking at my face, who didn't have enough courage to look at my own reflection from the spring, —— before saying,

"Oh right-na. I can express it in one word..... it's «Kiriemon»-na."

At that point, seeming as she had reached her limit, Argo fell to the ground, both feet wriggled while she rolled her body about, "Nyahahaha! Nya—hahahahaha!!" she continued laughing uncontrollably. Eternally, eternally...

I secluded myself on the mountain for three days and nights, by then, I managed to split the rock after a tremendous amount of struggle. It was fortunate that I had promised not to hold a grudge against Argo.

(End)

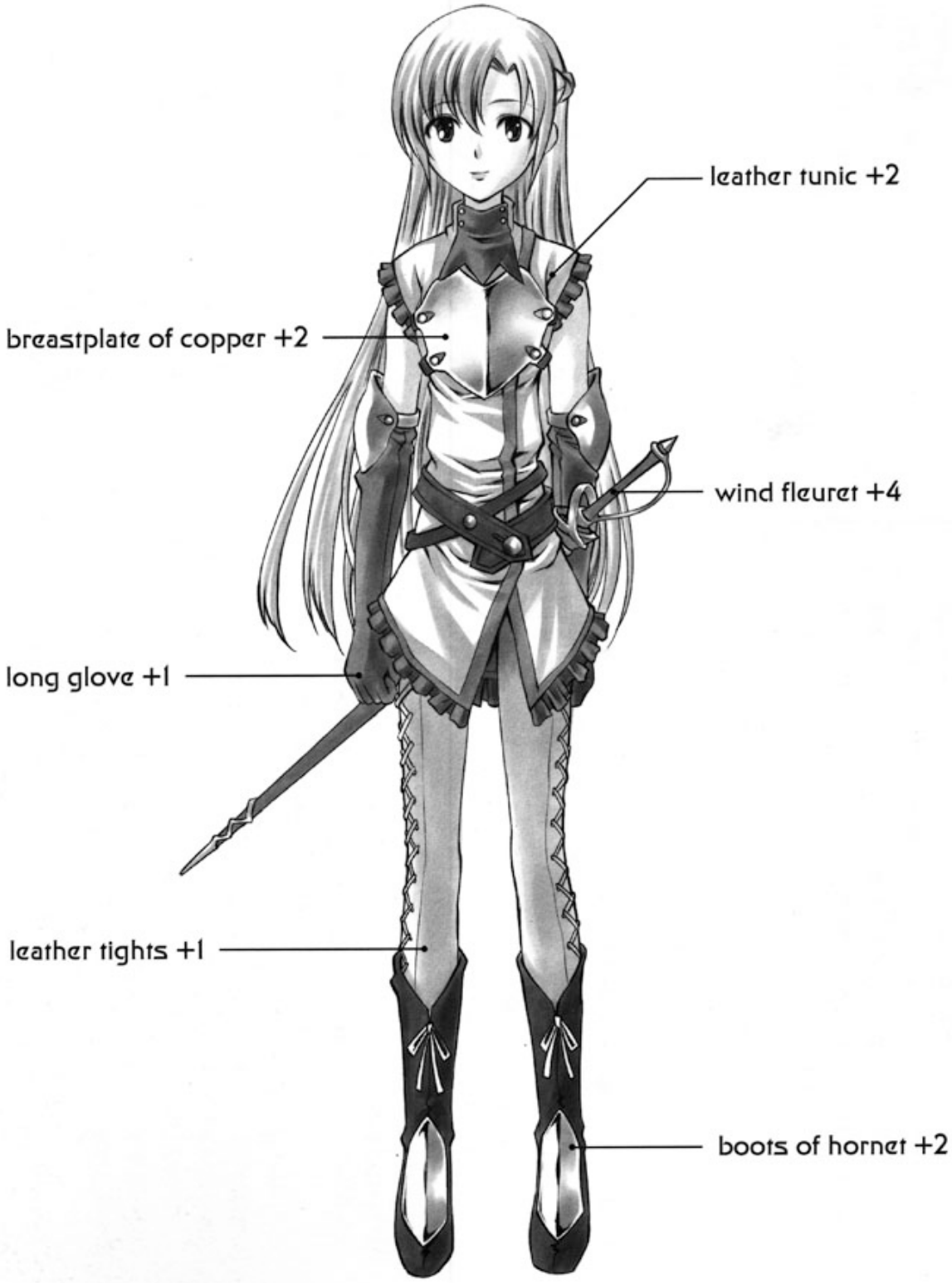
Rondo of the Transient Sword

first chapter

§ Aincrad 2nd Floor
§ 8th December 2022

ソードアートオンライン マテリアルエディション

8



SWORD ART ONLINE : MATERIAL EDITION 8

"Don't.....Don't, don't joke with me!!"

As a screaming echo resounded in my path, I stopped moving my feet.

As my footsteps went *su-su-su*, and I attached myself to the wall of the NPC store behind me, I peeked at the situation in front of me. In front of the road was a wide square, and the commotion seemed to come from that direction.

"Re-Return!! Return it to the original state!! It was a plus 4..... ch-change it back to the original!!"

Once again, the scream resounded. It looked as though it was trouble between two players. However, since we were inside the city's «crime prevention boundary» —— in the middle of Aincrad's second floor's main city «Urbus», both players could not actually harm each other, and there was no actual need for me to sneakily hide.

However, although I understood that in my head, I still had no choice but be thirty percent more cautious than usual. This was because, I, the level 13 one-handed sword user Kirito, am now Aincrad's most despised solo player..... because I am «The first person known as a beater».

8th December 2022, Thursday, thirty two days after the Death Game SAO started.

Four days had quickly passed after the first floor's boss monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord» was defeated, and Urbus' transition gate had been activated.

And in those four days, the events that transpired in the first floor's boss room was spread and exaggerated to every player on the front lines. Knowledge like the Boss monster having Katana Skills not being included in the prior information. The Raid Party's leader, the «Knight» Diabel's death. As well as, the person who had reached floors higher than anyone else in the beta period, and obtained knowledge by defeating the boss there, the person who obtained the last attack bonus, the «Beater».

Fortunately —— it could be said like this, although Kirito's name was widely spread, there should only be about forty players who knew what the avatar looked like. And in this SAO, irrelevant information like the names of people who had no relation to you would not show alongside the cursor. Therefore, even if I walk along the street and threw stones at them it would be alright. Well, if I threw stones at them the purple system barrier would probably temporarily block it.

Still, just to be on the safe side, the first floor's boss rare drop «Coat of Midnight» armor was unequipped, then tied a bandana on my forehead, making myself look unimportant. The reason for me to disguise myself in order to sneak into the main district city was not to see someone, but to get potions, food supplies and equipment maintenance that was necessary. About three kilometres southeast from here was the small village of «Marome», but its shops lacked variety in its wares, and furthermore there was no NPC blacksmith.

Due to those concerns, after my storage was first filled with loads of supplies, and I was walking down the street to complete my next errand, when the cry earlier reached my ears —— this was the reason.

After I had confirmed that the jeer, "Don't joke with me", was not directed at me in any way, I gave off a sigh, relaxed my guard, and continued to walk towards my destination which also happened to be the source of commotion at the eastern square of Urbus.

In less than a minute, I reached a low, circular open space in the shape of a mortar. Although it would normally be crowded at 3 pm. or the so called «Raid time», but as it was only a few days after the opening of the district, there were probably many players from «Starting City» who were touring the place.

These people stopped at the corner of the square, while there was a stammering cry similar to the previous one could be heard on the opposite end. I approached the crowd and slipped through the gaps, stretching my neck in order to know the reason for the commotion.

"W-Wh-Why is it like this!! The property unreasonably decreased!!"

The bright red face of the man who was yelling looked vaguely familiar. It was not a tourist, but a player who should be on the front lines. Although he did not take part in the first floor's raid battle, his level was reasonably high, based on the metal armor and three large horns on the helmet he wore.

Even more attention grabbing than that, the three horned man's right hand tightly held an unsheathed one-handed straight sword. Within the boundary it was impossible to hurt someone with that

blade, but brandishing it in a crowd was still a little disturbing. However, the man with blood rushing through his head continued to pound the tip of the sword into the stony ground and shouted,

"Why did I get four consecutive failures! Plus zero is unlikely, if it's like this isn't an NPC Blacksmith better! Take responsibility, you shitty blacksmith!!"

—— Being furiously scolded for a few minutes, despite giving a troubled expression, standing upright and remaining silent, was a plain brown leather apron wearing male player with a small stature.

A corner of the square was covered in a grey carpet, and placed above, on the narrow empty space was a chair and an anvil, and also a display shelf. That carpet was called a «Vendor's Carpet», and was by no means cheap, as it was a necessary item to put on a streets of the city to make a simple player's shop, essential for a novice merchant player. Of course, even without the carpet one could sell items, but the durability of the items left alone would decrease bit by bit, and you had to be wary of your wares being stolen. During the beta test period, the main streets of the main district city of each layer was bustling with merchants with various wares spread out on the carpets, but this was the first time I saw a carpet like this in the official service of SAO which had turned into a death game. No, even more than that, it was the first time I saw a blacksmith which was not an NPC but a player.

Based on this situation, I finally realized the reason for the commotion.

The sword that was being pounded into the ground while the man shouted had probably been «Enhanced» by the downcast blacksmith.

In general, a player's success rate was higher than that of an NPC at the same level, the related skill's mastery had to be raised solidly, but this could only be seen to some degree based on the appearance of the objects. Production based skills required tools —— for a blacksmith, the «Blacksmith's Hammer» series was needed —— which determined the equipment depending on the proficiency, but the set requirements were very subtle. At this moment, atop the anvil in front of the depressed blacksmith a few meters from me was the «Iron Hammer» which had a higher skill requirement than this city's blacksmith NPC used the «Bronze Hammer».

In other words, that Blacksmith's success rate of enhancing should be higher than that of the NPC's, if it were otherwise his business would not be feasible, which was probably why the three horned man had entrusted him with his beloved sword.

—— However. Unfortunately, in SAO, unless the proficiency of skill was greater than the margin, the chances of enhancing the weapon was not a hundred percent. For example, if it had a thirty percent chance of failure, then the chances of two consecutive failures would be nine percent, and three consecutive failures would be three percent, and finally the tragic four consecutive failures would be possible at 0.8 percent probability.

The surprising thing in the world of online games was, this degree of numbers was assuredly an «Event that would occasionally occur». In a title I had played previously, items with a drop rate set to 0.01 percent that made you want to cry "That's ridiculous" existed, but there were some really lucky players that actually got the item. I could not help but wish that this kind of devilish rarity does not

appear in SAO, but surely it did exist, and I would then live in a dungeon seeking it.....

".....What's all this commotion about"

A sudden whisper came from my right, beside me, surprising me as I looked at the source.

Standing there was a fine slender body of a FencerRapier User, wearing a white leather tunic, pale green leather tights, with a silver colored breast plate covering her chest. A player might mistake her for an elf which should not exist in Aincrad, although her clean and clear outfit's impression was ruined by an unfashionable gray wool cape from her head to her waist. Although this could not be helped. If she took of the cape, her glossy long chestnut hair, as well as that elf like appearance would be revealed, and the surrounding tourists would not leave her alone.

I took a very deep breath to calm my mind, one of the few people in this world.....in fact, there were only five people whom I could call «friend», and told her.

"It looks like, that three horned-kun's sword enhancing had....."

As my mouth uttered those words, I remembered that I was disguised, similar to the girl beside me. My black coat was replaced with a rustic leather armor, and my head was covered by a yellow and blue striped bandanna, disguising my body thoroughly, and I did not want to think that it was easily seen through. If that is the case, then for now I should respond under the guise of a first meeting.

".....ah, that, umm.....Have I seen you somewhere before?"

As soon as I had said that, from within the grey hood, two rapier sharp eyes attacked me with a horizontal penetrating look, directly piercing the area between my eyebrows.

“Instead of merely having met, I remember that we had a meal together and had even teamed up as a party.”

“.....ah, I remembered. Now I remembered. I even remembered that I lent you the bath at my place.”

Gash. The long boots —— named «Boots of Hornet» had its sharp heels embedded in my right foot and exploded, and some of my memories were lost.

I coughed *ehem* and cleared my throat, and pinched the edges of the rapier user’s hood with my fingertips, and dragged her to a place a few meters away where there was no one around, before greeting her again.

“Y-Yo, Asuna. Long time no see.....not really, two days no see.”

“Good afternoon, Kirito-kun.”

In any case, I had told her when we met two days ago to drop the «-kun» honorific since this was an avatar. However, it seems the VR game beginner still did not give up using it for some reason. If that was the case, then I should use «Asuna-san» to address her, but when I attempted it she replied with “It’s too troublesome, so don’t bother”, it’s really hard to understand a girl’s heart.

In any case, I somehow managed to peacefully greet her, and waved to draw her attention toward the commotion at the blacksmith’s stall which was still in full swing, and gave a brief description.

"That commotion is apparently, the three horned helmet's sword was given to the blacksmith to be enhanced, and it failed four times in a row, so it became plus zero, which made his blood rush to his head. Well.....I understand his feelings though.....four consecutive failures."

Then, the person I knew to be Aincrad's fastest and calmest (I wanted to add the most beautiful here, but omitted it to prevent conflict with the harassment code) player, the rapier user Asuna, shrugged and commented.

"If there is a possibility of failure, this person should be informed. That blacksmith-san, didn't he already put up a list of the success rate for each type of weapon in his store. Furthermore, if the enhancing failed he only has to bear the costs of the item materials, and not the reforging fee."

"Eh, really? That's really honest of him....."

The earnest blacksmith player continued to look down, and I remembered what he had muttered. Indeed, although forty percent of me sympathised with that three horned man, after hearing these words and numbers it dropped to twenty percent.

".....Perhaps, at the first failure, his blood rushed to his head, and he asked for it to be enhanced once more. That hotness and sadness always comes together with gambling....."

"That was a comment filled with feeling."

"N-No, It's merely a general assessment."

Here, the seventh floor during the beta test period had a monster arena which gave all properties satisfaction, but if I talked openly

about the experience it might not only **not** increase her impression of me, but decrease it instead, so based on this intuition, I looked away. Asuna gave a look of suspicion for a few seconds, fortunately she returned to the topic.

".....Well, even I don't think it is not pitiful, but there's no need for such excitement.....as long as he saves money for the materials, he can try again, right."

"Emm.....no, trying again is not possible."

"Why is that?"

As Asuna tilted her head, I thumbed at my beloved sword «Anneal Blade +6» hanging on my back as I commented.

"That three horn's sword is the same «Anneal Blade» as mine. Surely, he had also cleared the difficult quest on the first floor. Then, he brought it to a blacksmith NPC to enhance it to a +4. Well, up to that point success is really simple. However at +5 the probability of success would significantly drop, and the player blacksmith was requested to do it. However, the first attempt failed, so the number decreased to +3. Then he was asked to enhance it again to regain what was lost, but once again it failed and dropped to +2. That process repeated. After three, four times of failures, if finally became +0.....that is why."

".....But, from that point it can no longer decrease, so he can try for a +5 again....."

As those words left her mouth, Asuna seemed to realize the point that I was trying to get across, as her hazel eyes deep within the hood widened.

"I see..... «Maximum attempts at enhancing» huh. The upper limit of Anneal Blade, should be....."

"Eight times. In other words, four successes and four failures would use it up. So that sword can no longer be enhanced any more."

So —— This is SAO, where the weapon enhancing system was terrible.

In this world, the number of times an equipment could be enhanced, «Maximum attempts at enhancing» property has been set. This was not «Maximum possible value of enhancing». That value determined how many times you could attempt enhancing it. For example, my initial equipment «Small Sword» had a limit of one, so if we attempted to enhance it and failed, that sword could never be a +1 after that.

What was worse was, the success rate of enhancing, could be manipulated to some extent by the owner' efforts. Of course, that includes finding a skilled blacksmith (ultimately one could master their own forging skills and do it themselves, but this was unrealistic at the present time), and if the necessary material items needed for enhancing gathered were of extravagant and of high quality and quantity, this would further increase the chances of success.

Typically, blacksmith players would set the success rate of enhancing to around seventy percent for their requested fee. If the requester wanted more, they would have to pay an additional fee for a larger quantity of items, or hunt the items themselves.

Therefore, if there was a point to blame the three-horned man, it would be his hotheadedness in continuing to request enhancing the

failed items. If he had taken some time to calm down with a deep breath after the first failure, he should have paid more or came back later. That way, the valuable Anneal Blade would have avoided the tragedy of becoming +0 while using up all the attempts.

".....That's right. Well..... Indeed, I understood a little bit of that frantic feeling. Just a little."

I nodded as I agreed with Asuna's comment, and gave a moment of silence for that pitiful sword. The voice of the man who was still continuing to yell as usual was interrupted. It seems two of his friends had apparently rushed in. They each placed a hand on his shoulders, and tried hard to calm him down.

".....There, there, It'll be fine, Ryufior. I'll help you do the Anneal Blade quest again today."

"If we can work hard for it for a week, let's aim for a +8 this time."

.....Oh, now it takes a week for three people to do it. Fortunately I did it early.

So, with this realistic thought,

.....You, cherish those friends of yours. And next time, don't gamble at enhancing recklessly.

I looked at them with an emotional feeling, the three horned renamed to Ryufior-shi also regained his composure, and left the square as he walked away with slumped shoulders.

Behind him, the blacksmith who had endured the scolding quietly all this while timidly said something.

"That.....I'm really, really sorry for that. Next time, I will really, really try my best.....ah, again, you can ask me to do it again although you might hate me....."

Ryufior, who was walking, stopped and turned to face the blacksmith, and said in a suddenly changed voice.

".....It's not your fault.....I said various things aloud, that was bad of me."

"No..... that is also within my job scope....."

With his hands clasped in front of his leather apron, the blacksmith lowered his head, he looked as though he was very youthful, in his teens. With thin, drooping eyes coupled with casual hair that was separated down the middle, like that, he gave off a legitimate «Production Character» impression. If he had a smaller and stouter build, he would look like a member of the «Dwarf» race.....No, since he has no beard it would probably be a «Gnome».

While I thought about this and looked at their interaction, the blacksmith stepped forward and bowed deeply again, and said.

"Um, although I don't think it is a good apology.....that, +0 end Anneal blade which was my fault, if it's alright with you, perhaps you could let me buy it for eight thousand coll....."

Zuwa..... the surrounding onlookers caused a stir, and from my throat "ooh" leaked out.

At the current market rate, the obtainable through quest reward only clean Anneal Blade +0 is worth sixteen thousand coll. Eight thousand coll was half that much, and although Ryufior's blade had the same stats, the number of attempts had been exhausted and it

was now an «End Product». It was now worth less than half the market value, perhaps about four thousand coll. It was an exceptional offer for an apology.

Ryufi-shi and his two friends were stunned and looked at each other, then all three nodded at the same time.

After the series of events ended, the three people, along with the onlookers, dispersed from the square, kan, kan, the rhythmic sound of a hammer began to start. The stall's dwarf..... I mean, blacksmith, began forging something on the anvil.

Asuna and I sat down on a bench on the opposite side of the circular square, vaguely listening to that sound.

Originally, I wasn't planning to stay so long in this square, I would have quickly finished my errands by now and escape from Urbus. There were two reasons my plans had changed. Because I encountered one of the few people in Aincrad's who did not call me a «Filthy Beater», allowing me to practice the use of the Japanese language. The other —— was my original errand, which was, to enhance the Anneal Blade +6 that was on my back.

I overheard yesterday, while I was in Marome Village, that a reasonably skilled blacksmith player had appeared in Urbus' eastern square. I thought, that it was a good time to challenge +7, so I had carried the material items needed for enhancing it, then disguised myself and came back to Urbus, but this unexpected event had occurred first.

Actually, I could stand up from the bench and walked up to the blacksmith and say "Excuse me, I would like to enhance something,"

right now. As it was my first meeting with the Dwa.....no, young man, he certainly wouldn't say "I will not forge a beater's sword with my hammer."

However, earlier events had somewhat put pressure on me. The same Anneal Blade, had a set success rate of seventy percent, but +4 became +0. Statistically, it was possible, but it was no doubt a first class tragedy. If the same thing happened to me, I wouldn't go on a rampage, but would probably not leave my room for three days.

If I requested for enhancement in this mental state, how to put it..... It was rude towards Ryufior-shi's declining fortunes, and it felt like my sword would probably fail and become a +5. Then, I will go "Awawawawa" and challenge it again without any additional material, so it would fail once again and become +4. Naturally, there was no logical proof to that reasoning, «Net Game's Enhancement Gamble» could not be predicted by logic.....

".....So?"

I gazed blankly at the sudden voice next to me.

"Huh? What?"

".....Don't 'what' at me. Weren't you the one who asked me to sit here?"

Asuna glared at me.

"Eh, ah, tha-that's true. Sorry, I was thinking about something....."

"Thinking about something..... Kirito-kun, you came for that blacksmith's enhancement, didn't you?"

"Eh, ho-how did you know?"

As I was startled backwards, the rapier user gave an amazed look and said.

“When we met yesterday at Marome, you said you were going to the east of the rocky mountain area to hunt «Red Spotted Beetle». If so, you must have decided to collect material to enhance your one handed sword.”

“O.....Oh.”

I unintentionally gave out that sound.

“.....What is with that reaction?”

“It’s nothing.....it just doesn’t seem like the words of a person who did not even know where the party member’s name was displayed just four days ago.....ah, it-it isn’t irony. I was just impressed.”

“.....”

My sincere words probably made her understand, as Asuna’s facial expression subtly softened somewhat.

“It’s because I’ve been learning various things lately.”

She murmured. I was happy for some reason, and I nodded continuously as I talked.

“I see, um, that’s a good thing. In the MMO world, without knowledge the results would be very different. If you want to know anything don’t hesitate to ask, because I am a former tester, I know everything up to the tenth floor, from the product’s lineup to the mob’s call.....”

As I was carried away and talked up to this point, I realized that I committed a large mistake.

As I had said, I was a former tester, and at the same time, currently among the «Amassing and hoarding vast knowledge for their self interest, an evil Beater». On the first floor's boss raid battle, starting with the knight Diabel's friends, the high levelled players who hated and detested me were not few. Although I had disguised myself with leather armor and a bandanna, anyone who looked closely at my face would recognize me as Kirito, and the person talking and sitting on the same bench as me was Asuna, which would condemn her as a beater's friend. Chatting so unconcernedly in this busy place, was too careless of me.....

"Ah.....So-Sorry. I have something urgent to do, I just remembered."

As I tried to stand up with that lame excuse, my shoulders ——

The rapier user suddenly used the tip of her supple index finger to closely control me, and in a very small volume whispered to me.

".....You bear all the resentment and hate against all former testers by yourself, I think that's too excessive for you..... but because that is your decision, I did not say anything. But, you should respect my choice too. I don't care what other people think. I'll be your acqua.....friend then even if you don't like the appearance, I would not let you have said anything from the start anyway."

".....I lost. Everything.... had been predicted, huh."

Muttering, I lowered myself onto the bench once more.

My motive for becoming a beater in the first floor's boss room, and the reason for my attempt to escape a few seconds ago, had been guessed with zero percent error, making me emit a *gu* sound. Giving up, I raised my hands in surrender. Asuna gave a small smile from deep within the hood, and said.

"If you are Aincrad's pro, I am a girls school bred pro at psychological warfare. I can read you as easy as pie based on your avatar's expression."

"Th.....That is really easy to overlook....."

"Therefore, I think it's about time you taught me, the reason why you are hesitant to enhance your weapon. Actually, I came here today to ask that blacksmith-san to enhance my sword too."

"Eh....."

At her unexpected words, I gazed at the weapon which was suspended at Asuna's waist. Kept in an ivory sheath, the name of the rapier with the dark green guard was «Wind Fleuret». When we formed a party for the first floor's boss raid, she replaced her equipment, so her initial sword was replaced by this monster drop. It was actually a pretty rare item, if it was properly enhanced it had the potential to be used all the way to the third floor.

"That, should be +4 only?"

Asuna nodded at my question.

"You brought your own enhancement material? What type did you bring?"

"Let's see.....four «plank of steel», twelve «Needle of Wind Wasp»"

"Heh, you worked hard..... but....."

I mentally calculated the success rate, and groaned.

"Um, with this the success rate to get a +5 is around eighty percent."

"Is the risk not low enough?"

“Well, normally it would be so..... but after that show just now.....”

I turned to glance at the opposite end of the square, where, rhythmically hammering away, was the dwarf.....-like blacksmith player. Asuna turned to look as well, then gave a light shrug.

“The probability of a thrown coin landing on any face, regardless of any previous outcome, is always fifty percent. The person just now tried and had a few failures in a row, and our attempts at enhancing our weapons should be unrelated, right?”

“That.....should be true.....”

As I mumbled trying to enunciate a bad word that rolled around in my mouth, I gave it some thought. The rapier user Asuna is a person who used science and logic, while I was trying to convince her about “a gamble flow”. Even for me, using my left brain’s feeling of a «Bad Flow» wasn’t a basis for an argument.

On the other hand, my right brain felt something. Whether it was my Anneal Blade or Asuna’s Wind Fleuret, if we asked the blacksmith to enhance it here and now, even if we used materials to boost its probability of success, it would fail. Ignoring my intuition was not good, this was my personal rule, based on my experience of playing net games for many years.

“Hey, Asuna”

I turned my body to the right to face Asuna directly, using my most serious voice and expression and said.

“Wha.....What is it?”

“You’d like the success rate at ninety percent compared to eighty, right?”

"..... That is true, of course"

"Compared to ninety percent, you'd like ninety five percent, right?"

"..... That is true too, of course"

"Then, I think compromising is not good. Since there is a way to collect the material anyway, why not do our best to aim for ninety five percent."

"....."

The rapier user looked at me for a few seconds with a suspicious expression, then, as if she suddenly felt something, she slowly blinked with her long eyelashes, before saying.

"Yes, It is true that I don't like compromises. But I don't like people who move their mouths but not their hands just as much."

"..... Eh?"

"Since you can talk up to this point, you must help me pursue perfection, Kirito-kun. Incidentally, the Wind Wasp's needle's drop rate is eight percent."

"..... Eh?"

"Once you have decided, let's go to the hunting grounds. With two people, we should be able to hunt a hundred or so before dark."

"..... Eh?"

While I gave off a dull face, Asuna slapped me on my shoulders, and stood up, before raising her eyebrows a little as she delivered the final blow.

“And, if you want to hunt with me as a combination, please remove that flashy bandanna. I’m really sorry, but it does not suit you at all.”

(Chapter 1 End)

Afterword

Hello Everyone, I am Kunori Fumio/Kawahara Reki. Thanks for buying this book.

Isn't this incomplete!!!

I think anyone who read till this point would probably say this. I'm really sorry for not finishing.....orz. This «Rondo of the transient sword first chapter» is, as its name suggests, the first chapter, and will continue through the raid of the second floor to its completion.

Originally, I had planned for this story to be serialized on my homepage on new year's eve, and while making a book for COMITIA98, I couldn't think of a story until the end, and only could use the familiar Aincrad to escape. For this reason, I would like to offer two kinds of apologies for those who bought this book. This book's "first chapter" is scheduled to be published on my personal home page at the end of this year. I am really sorry.

This story, «~Rondo» is the direct sequel to my web serialization «Aria in the Starless night» this summer. Although it is merely a concept, I'm still thinking of writing the events of Asuna and Kirito's adventure, but as I thought to this point, If I had to write floor by floor, it would take a few years, no, tens of years to be able to finish writing it.....(Laughs). Before writing one must be prepared! But now that I've already started, thinking like that is

useless, so I can only go for it. As long as everyone can endure it, I will definitely keep you company.

Monochrome Concerto

first chapter

§ Aincrad 3rd Floor
§ 14th December 2022

ソードアートオンライン マテリアルエディション 9

SWORD ART ONLINE : MATERIAL EDITION 9

Part 1

On the first floor of Aincrad, there was no theme, If we really had to say it, it would be «Everything is included». Grasslands, forests, the wilderness, the valley was rich in its variety of terrain. Outside of the main City, there were many small villages, the fantasy RPG had many exciting atmospheres to greet the players that arrived —— but, under the conditions of a «Death Game», only a few people leisurely enjoyed this scenery.

Then came the second floor, which broke out of the fantasy kitchen sink and formed a theme. The entire floor was changed to a green grass covered layered mountains. The monsters that appeared were now animal based. Perhaps it was because the first floor was difficult, as the difficulty of the second floor did not increase, instead giving off a relaxed feeling, like that of a pasture. But a majority of players called it the «Cow's Floor». There should be no need to explain the reason for this.

And now —— was the untainted, third floor.

As I climbed up the spiral staircase which linked the second floor's boss area to the third floor's main city, I talked to myself while clenching my right fist.

"In one sense, this can be considered where SAO really starts....."

Although this was just a line to set my mood, a voice whispered in return.

"Really? Why would you say that?"

Right after this question was asked, I scratched my head, and answered.

"Well..... from the third floor on, true humanoid mobs would start to appear. The first floor's Kobold and Taurus were only of the half human, «Demi-Human» class, capable of using simple sword skills, but its external appearance is that of a monster, right? However, from here on, there will be a lot of enemies whose external appearance is no different from a human's. If not for the color cursor, it would be completely impossible to distinguish them. Of course, they are able to hold conversations like NPCs, and their sword skills are also at a very high level. In other words....."

I turned my head, and looked over my shoulder to face the rapier user Asuna, and said.

"..... From this point on, is where the prologue of Sword Art Online ends. The man who locked us in here, Kayaba Akihito, had said in a SAO special edition magazine interview, '«Sword Art Online» is where swords and sword skills intertwine together, writing a melody of light and sound, a Concerto of life and death'....."

".....Oh....."

Even though she was listening to this sentence which had made me excited a year ago, Asuna didn't even look touched. She used her regular pace to climb the staircase, and gently shrugged, and said something I didn't expect.

"..... Since that interview, Kayaba had already planned this crime....."

"Ei.....aa, maaa, of course..... this should be the case."

On a day a month and a week ago, in front of the ten thousand players forced to gather in the central plaza, Kayaba had said this,

"To create and watch this world is the only reason I have created the Nerve Gear and SAO. And now, everything has been realized."

Supposing those words were true, even before Kayaba Akihito had planned SAO, before even outlining the Nerve Gear, he had planned this monstrous crime. Able to impress my young (more accurately, a year ago) heart, in the few interviews he gave, his words had two meanings. Facing me, who had just learnt that fact, Asuna said softly.

"A Concerto of.....life and death. Does this truly only refer to players crossing their swords and sword skills against humanoid monsters?"

"Eh..... What do you mean.....?"

I shrank my neck. Maintaining my posture of looking backward, as I climbed up the 'stairs between the the labyrinth area and the upper floor'. Because the design of this stairs were mostly the same, including during the beta test, I have climbed up these stairs around ten times. Only the relief on the black walls were different, which, upon closer inspection, implied the theme and landscape of the next floor, but I was too busy focusing on Asuna's body at the moment.

The rapier user's expression became more serious, and spoke to herself in a quiet voice.

"Perhaps I'm overthinking it..... This Concerto, is not actually music created by a pair of musical instruments. If it is played in pairs, the 'Duet' is more appropriate."

"Then..... the Concerto's, real meaning is.....?"

"As time passed by the meaning changed little by little, but basically it is the music of an orchestra, or many instruments accompanying the lead, a lone musical instrument.....In other words, it isn't one on one, but one against many, or should I say it's the music from a small group against a large one."

"One against.....many....."

I repeated the phrase I was pondering quietly, considering saying, "If it's like this, then isn't it comparable to a player against a group mob?" —— But, as I opened my mouth to say it, I closed it again.

In this world, a player against many, the scene of being in combat with, for example, ten or more monsters, was impossible. This is because, there was no destructive area of effect magic, and a ranged sword skill could only attack within the weapon's range, therefore, in SAO, being surrounded by monsters meant instant death.

Of course, the game design mirrored this fact, as most of the mobs were on their own, or at most two or three would appear at once. Unless they were intentionally brought together, or the player accidentally stepped on a trap, a situation where one player fought against many would never happen..... what's more, even if they did, they would be attempting to escape with all their might.

".....If this is the case, a Concerto like battle would never occur in this world. If you want to insist on it, it would be limited to the boss battle..... but, that would be a boss battle, meant for a raid group."

As Asuna looked at me who shrugged and gave a forced smile, she looked as though she wanted to say something, but did not open her mouth. After a beat, she broke out into a smile and nodded.

"Yes, maybe I'm overthinking it.....we shouldn't raise this topic right, Kirito-kun?"

"Eh? What?"

".....Nothing, it's already over."

After listening to this, my head which was still facing backwards, hit the top of the thick stone door.

"Ouch....."

Making a noise which people wouldn't think I was the type to make it, I waved my arms at the same time to prevent falling down due to a misstep, as I had climbed a stair that wasn't there. However, I did not regain my balance, and at this moment, rather than falling forward and hitting Asuna, why not fall backward?

At that moment, as I tried to lean on the door which had been unknowingly opened, I cried "Waaaa" as I went out of the large door, and beautifully fell down on the moss covered rock floor on my butt. This became the untainted floor's memorable first imprint.

Aincrad, Third Floor.

This floor's designed theme was «Forest». However, unlike the first floor's Horunka village's surroundings, and the southern region of the second floor's forest, the scale was completely different. This was because even the smallest tree had a trunk diameter of one meter and the shortest trees were thirty metres tall. Using large trees to describe them were inappropriate, as the ancient trees could be seen to stretch out to the skies without limits. The golden rays

coming from between the overlapping leaves and branches illuminated the land, looking like a land of fantasy.

"Woah.....!"

Beside me, enduring the pain in my tailbone, Asuna cheered in a happy tone and rushed out of the door. I turned eighty degrees while still on the ground, as my eyes followed her figure. Asuna stopped in a place not too far away, and spun round and round under the slender rays of the sun, looking as though she was extremely fond of the scenery of this forest that seemed to extend out forever.

"This is great.....Just seeing this scenery makes me feel as though the hard work of climbing up here is not wasted."

The rapier user normally equipped with a hooded cape had her hood down, so the rays of the sun were reflected dazzlingly off her beautiful, glossy, long, smooth, thin, chestnut hair into my eyes. Her slim build, in addition to her cool beauty, made players think that she wasn't a player, but a fairy of the forest.

".....It truly is not wasted."

After quietly saying these words, I stood up. Taking off my leather coat, I lazily stretched. I have no idea whether it was an illusion or not, but the air was filled with a sweet scent. The essence of large numbers of plants.....perhaps this was the cause.

Glancing behind me, circled by the roots of a gigantic tree, was a stone structure. We had just climbed out of its black opening. The others raiders would probably come up here in about ten minutes.

".....Next....."

Although we were on the third floor —— our actions from here on have yet to be determined. Of course, on a new floor we would still do things we did in the previous floor, which was to go to the main city to shop for items, get quests, and fight to increase our level. However, before that, I had a matter to confirm.

After deciding that, I moved to Asuna's side, and since she was still enjoying the scenery, gave off an initial light cough to alert her to my presence, and opened my mouth.

"Hey, I'm sorry to disturb your mood.,....."

"......? What?"

The rapier user gave me a rare smile, so I raised my right hand and extended my forefinger to guide her line of sight toward the north. Extending from the stone structure behind us was an ancient road, which had a Y junction in the middle of the path about twenty meters away.

"Going along the road to the right will quickly lead you to the main city. Going along the left is a forest that, after some time, will lead to this floor's first labyrinth."

"......Um"

"Generally speaking, we should head for the main city to activate the transition gate, but let's leave that task to Lynd's and Kibaou's group who are hot on our heels."

".....Um."

"The reason is, I don't want to meet them, as well as I have a quest I must complete in the forest to the left. However, both of these are personal reasons....."

At this point, the rapier user's smile gradually faded. Inversely, her pupils gave off a ray of dangerous light. From this point on, if I said the wrong thing, Asuna's mood would sour, and even though I could perceive this, I still couldn't work out a theory to avoid it.

".....So?"

At the urging of this grim voice, I continued while facing downward in fear and trepidation.

"...That... We probably need to resupply and maintain our weapons, if Asuna wants to aim for the main city, I think we can disband our party..... Of course, if you are willing to come with me to finish what I need to do in the forest, I don't.....mind....."

"Don't-wan-na, I didn't have the intention of not disbanding the party anyway. You and I are both solo players, right?"

"Y-Yes."

"However, the thing you just mentioned, should be «The one who finishes first gets an advantage» right? Then, I'll go with you, as I hate low efficiency. Of course, if you want to disband the party and throw me aside, monopolizing all the benefits for yourself, I can only agree with you."

"I-I wouldn't dare, I never thought of monopolizing, not even a little. In fact, more people would be more efficient."

"In that case let's hurry along. It won't matter if we resupply and maintain our equipment later."

"Yes, ok."

The rapier user turned, and made a patapata sound as she started to walk, I followed to catch up to her back, feeling in my heart a mysterious «Barely passed» feeling . I didn't even understand the requirements to «Pass»

Really, If I knew this would happen, I would have had more interaction with the girls in my class..... as I thought until this point, I snorted in denial. If I had such an ability during middle school, I would not have snuck into SAO five seconds after the game's official launch. In other words, this kind of situation, walking together with a temperamental rapier user, would not occur, I reasoned.

—— Having said that, I suddenly had this thought.

Thinking back about the past month being imprisoned in this game, In order to survive.....that is, to continuously rush and strengthen myself, have I ever regretted being in this VRMMO called SAO?

Most people would regret it, not regretting it was an abnormal ability. However, no matter how I searched my past own feelings, although I easily found fear and homesickness, I couldn't find regret.

Perhaps I was an abnormal person, or perhaps I was in so grim a situation that there was no time for remorse. If the latter was the case, the cause of this state was without a doubt the valiant rapier user walking three meters in front of me. It was because this sword user always made a racket that I am able to feel regret, as all the other negative emotions were pushed to the back of my mind.....

—— No-no-no, even in my mind I wouldn't thank her.

Having determined this resolutely, I increased my pace to catch up to my party member, and walked by her side.

Part 2

Based on my beta testing experience, after players defeated the floor boss, going up the stairs onto a new floor and into a new district, within the thirty minutes for activating the transition gate, the monster POP was controlled to a low value.

It was probably like this in order for the players who had come up to the new floor just after being worn out from fighting the boss to not be exterminated by the small fry mob, but unfortunately this grace was only limited to the nearby surroundings of the city.

Just after walking along the forest trail for five minutes, we had to increase our pace in order to keep up with our enemies' searching ability. I could feel the changes to the surrounding air. The happifying and beautiful fantasy forest, step by step changed into a cold and hostile «outsider» feeling.

"Asuna, the enemy spawning here has strength similar to those guys on the second floor labyrinth. Because a majority of them are animal and plant based monsters, they will not use sword skills."

After listening to my words, the rapier user silently nodded.

"However, based on the mobs general prewritten battle movements, they will unceasingly bring us deeper into the forest. Once the monsters spot any mistakes we make, they will launch ambushes, and even if we defeat it successfully, we may end up lost."

"However, as long as we look at the map, we should be able to find our way out, right?"

"About that....."

I swung my right hand forward, and quickly opened the map window, hastily inputting commands to switch it to public viewing mode, and then showed it to Asuna.

"Ah.....The color is very faint."

Exactly as she said, the majority of the map appeared like misty ash, and according to the general situation, the places which we have explored would emerge in a 3D view, however, because the map for this place was extremely faded, even if we were very attentive we could not see the path.

"This region is called the «Misty Forest», the map colour becomes faint in addition to the strong fog, which will really cause people to get lost. Therefore, even if we're in the middle of battle you absolutely must not leave your party or the path. This point is very important."

"Understood. .....Then you should quickly show me a demonstration."

"Eh?"

"What, just look clearly. Right behind you."

At the end of her words, I gingerly looked behind, and just a little off the forest's stone path..... Lets just say a withered tree grew there. Its pale yellow trunk had a diameter of fifteen centimeters, and it was only two meters high, much smaller than the trees which surrounded it. However, situated at the side of the three trunk were two holes close together, emitting a light like that of eyes. To its left and right were claw like branches swaying constantly.

Although the dead tree and I only crossed eyes for a split second, its roots on its right side began emitting a creaking sound, as it left the floor, taking a step forward. It was followed by the roots on its left. As it moved forward swaying unstably, it suddenly changed into a sprint. A third hole opened beneath the other two, and from it a "Moroooooo!" roar was issued.

The withered tree changed into the plant type mob «Treant Sapling», possessing many special abilities, one of which was, while embedded in the ground, a player's enemy searching ability would not get a reaction from it. It looks like the Treant had walked next to me while I was lost in thought giving the explanation.

Must not be careless! I told myself, at the same time my right hand reached to the back and pulled out my «Anneal Blade+7», making a loud sound.

As the branches to the left and right were cut, and it's opened mouth was drilled by Asuna's «Wind Fleuret+5», the Treant gave a "Moroooo!" sorrowful cry as it turned into powder. The battle only lasted three minutes.

Asuna and I gently bumped our left fists to celebrate our victory, sheathing our swords at the same time. Although we were careful, the Treant's «Changing the body's front and back direction» skill was meant to confuse us, and we had moved five meters away from the path of the forest. At this degree it was still easy to go back to the path. In heavier mist, leaving ten meters from the path would be trouble.

While moving along the trail, Asuna said.

“I keep getting..... an extremely evil feeling”

“Eh?”

“Because, that ghost tree just now, it was a still growing sapling, right? Chopping it down makes me feel not environmentally friendly”

“This, like this, well, this is so.....but, I think if anyone who has seen the «Elder Treant» monster, will think “Must destroy it while it is in the sapling stage”.”

“.....There is no need to talk like that. One Kibaou is enough.”

As we were joking away, we returned to the path, and heaved a long sigh. The golden rays that came from the roof of our heads came down at a greatly changed angle, it looks like night was falling soon.

“.....Continue. What did we come to this area to do.....”

“To do.....I say, that. It’s what Kirito-kun said earlier, “I have a quest I must complete.”.”

“It’s that. That said, It was only possible for a quest..... the quest starting NPC is in a random place. Asuna, are you confident in your ears?”

As I said this, I calmly looked away, as if nothing happened in the past, and saw the rapier user cover her cherry red ears with her hands and retreating a step back for some reason..

“.....Kirito-kun, do you have an interest in that aspect? Do you have an ear fetish?”

"Ce-ce-certainly not! In this situation, I am obviously not talking about the shape, but the hearing ability....."

"I'm just joking. Besides, it doesn't matter how good our hearing is. We are not even listening to the sound using the vibration of the membranes, its just the stimulation of the brain."

".....I see, it's like this. Then let's look for it together. If we rely on our hearing ability it will be a lot easier....."

I straightened my back, despite knowing that it made little sense, I still put my hands behind my ear, and Asuna imitated me, saying,

"Looking together is fine, but what kind of sound is it? Don't tell me it's the sound of leaves dropping."

"Of course I won't. It's not a natural sound, but a metallic noise.....More specifically, the sound of swords colliding with each other."

At these words, Asuna gave a dubious look, but quickly said "understood".

Standing in the center of the path, Asuna and I put our backs together, using a total of four ears to launch an all around search. Generally speaking, the community would miss it, but because this was the virtual reality, there were various skills in existence to detect various noises in the surroundings. The chirping of the wind, the leaves rubbing together, an animal's footsteps behind us, the call of the birds..... I took all these noises and filtered them out of my mind, looking for the stiff quality of a man made noise.....

".....!"

Asuna and I who were leaning on each other, trembled at the same time. I faced right, while Asuna turned to the left, to look in the same direction.....the south-west direction. Although it was quite subtle, there were indeed sounds of sword skills coming from that direction.

“Let’s go.”

Asuna pulled on my coat as I walked a step forward.

“But, I thought we shouldn’t go into the forest?”

“No problems, as long as you accept the quest you can return to the road.”

“.....And if you don’t accept?”

“It’s really not a problem, camping equipments are already laid out! Let’s hurry!”

Advancing toward our target within the forest at a high speed, I head a “Yaa.....!” reminiscing sound, but it was quickly covered by the footsteps behind me.

Leaving the stone path, I ignored the moss covering the earth surface which gave off a relaxing sensation to the soles of my feet. Avoiding the gigantic trees’ dry branches, we dashed towards the source of the noise. If we encountered a mob it would be very troublesome, so I took advantage of my mob searching ability to look for color cursors. Finding a Treant growing out of the ground was difficult, but fortunately I didn’t encounter one.

After five minutes, the steel sounds became louder, and accompanying the fencing sounds at the same time were yells. In the

center of our view, two NPC cursors appeared, and then I saw the reflected light effect off a tree trunk.

Going around that tree would allow us to reach the battlefield we were aiming for —— at this time I stopped my feet, and stretched out my right hand to stop Asuna. I made a gesture with my index finger to tell her to be quiet, then the two of us hid together behind a tree trunk, sneaking peeks past the edge of the tree, at the battlefield.

In a slightly larger clearing, two silhouettes were in a fierce battle.

One of them was a tall male with shining gold and green armor. In his right hand was a long sword, while his left held a round shield, and at a glance you would know that they were high grade goods. The hair on his head was a beautiful platinum, and his external appearance made one think of a handsome Scandinavian actor from Hollywood.

The other person, had armor which was in a contrast to the first, as it was purple and black. The somewhat curved saber and small kite shield used were both of a gloomy dark colour, but their quality was just as good as the first person's. The short dark purple hair, and dark skinned face appeared to possess a high level of good looks. Beautiful red lips and a slightly bulging bosom indicated that that this black swordsman was female.

"Haa!"

The platinum haired male gave a fierce roar, at the same time swinging down the sword in his right hand.

"Yaa!"

The purple haired female countered with her saber. *Clang* a crisp metallic sound resounded, and created a bright light that illuminated the dark forest.

".....Are, are these really NPCs.....?"

Underneath me, Asuna did not dare to believe those words. I understood her feelings. Their bodies' movements and vivid expressions completely did not look as though they were controlled by a system, like a soulless virtual body. However ——

"Look at their ears."

"Ei.....Ah! Both of them .....sharp. This is....."

"The male is a «Forest Elf», while the female is a «Dark Elf». One more thing, look at the top of their heads."

At his words, Asuna's line of sight was drawn slightly upward. She once again gave off an "ah" sound.

Both of the fiercely battling warriors had a «!» sign above their heads. It was the proof that they were the starting point of an NPC quest. Normally, if you get close to them and speak, the quest would start immediately. However ——

"Both of them have a quest, and they are both still fighting, what is the problem here?"

"To put it briefly, you can only accept one quest. —— I leave this important decision to you, Asuna."

At my words, the rapier user's line of sight left the Elves, as she raised her head to look at me.

"Decision.....?"

"Yup. The quest they give, is not a single nor consecutive type of quest. It is the first of a large scale mission-type quest. It will start from this floor until the ninth floor"

"Ninth....."

Ninth Floor!? Asuna quickly covered her mouth before saying these words, but her hazel eyes were enlarged in surprise. Looking at her like this, I became very happy, and added even more astonishing information.

"In addition to that, if you made a mistake you are not allowed to restart. Of course, you can't take the opposite route either. The route chosen here, must be continued until the ninth floor."

"I say.....you should have told me of this matter earlier....."

The angry expression Asuna had, suddenly gave way to a suspicious one.

".....Opposing routes? In other words, those two Elves....."

"I see. Who to help, and who to fight. Black or white, which do you choose?"

Listening to the question I raised, for some reason Asuna stared at me.

".....This, there's no alternative option right? It's fine in an ordinary game, but we are currently in SAO. It's not like you can't go along the route you went along as a beta tester. That .....I, have complete confidence in whatever your choice is."

Uuu. It was my turn to fall silent. Asuna's eyes became indifferent, and she used a resolute tone to assert.

"——The lady Dark Elf . Didn't you?"

"い、イエスアイ(Y-Yes I do)ドゥー.....But, but not because she was a girl, but because she was dark skinned."

——An excuse like that should not have worked, and I only saw Asuna standing still, her head was turned to a side.

"Maa, this is fine. I didn't want to join the male to cut down the female one anyway. Let's join the black elf and defeat the white one. Let's go."

After speaking these words very quickly, Asuna got ready to get out of her hiding spot, and I quickly held on to her hood.

"Wait, wait. There is another important thing."

"Which is?"

"That is.... How to say, even if you chose to aid the black side, we can't defeat the white Elf, regretfully."

"Eh.....Eeeeh!?"

In order to keep the wide eyed Asuna calm, I rested my hand on her slender shoulders before continuing.

"I can see from their valiant equipment, the white Elf is a Forest Elf, the black Elf is a Dark Elf, and they are originally from the seventh floor, and are in fact the elite mob there. No matter what methods to ensure our safety while we fight, they are not opponents that people like us who just came to the third floor can handle."

"Th-Then.....What should we do? After all.....If we die....."

"Relax, even if we lose we don't die. When our HP gauge is reduced to half, we can join her party and she will use powerful skills, that will be the time we can overpower the opponent. What we have to do is, don't panic as we defend as much as possible, and wait for assistance. The greatest danger is if we panic and escape, as the other monsters would be drawn out and cause trouble."

".....I understand."

"Good."

I pat Asuna on her back, then removed my hand.

"Then, dash out when I count to three. The quest will start by itself once we are close, so you just need to stay beside me."

The rapier user nodded as she walked to my side, and when I counted down starting from three, in my heart I gave a brief apology.

Actually, I had left out some information which I didn't tell Asuna. Which was, the one we were preparing to assist .....the Dark Elf lady named «Kizmer», in order to help us to suppress the Forest Elf, after using her forbidden skill, she would sacrifice herself to take down her enemy along with her. Even if we took the other path, which was to join the Forest Elf to fight the Dark Elf, the end result was the same. No matter which path we chose, these two Elves would die here, and will soon be followed by a long military campaign.....No, it was a story about to unfold.

".....Two, One, Zero!"

As I finished counting down aloud, Asuna and I flew out to the open space. The two elves in battle both looked at us at the same

time, and fiercely jumped back to put some distance between them. At the same time, the «!» sign on both of their heads turned into «?».

“What are you humans doing in this forest?” the Forest Elf said.

“Don’t come here and disturb us! leave us immediately!” These words were said by miss Dark Elf.

Of course, we could also leave at this time. But then the quest would not begin. Asuna and I exchanged glances, then unsheathed our swords together —— and pointed the tip at the shiny breastplate belonging to the Forest Elf.

The handsome face gradually grew fierce. The NPC’s yellow cursor, began to flicker and was on the verge of becoming red.

“You’re incredibly stupid..... you want to join the Dark Elves, so you want to become the rust on my blade?”

“Yes.....”

“Yes, but the one to disappear is this DV guy!”

After saying out his resolute lines, in front of me, who did not know why he referred to me as DV, the Forest Elf’s cursor changed. From light yellow —— it became a bright red. Woah real strong, and at this moment, a beautiful and ruthless smile emerged on his handsome face.

“All right, then I shall destroy you, human.”

Shalaa! I concentrated to position my long sword, and at the same time told Asuna,

“That’s good, focus on defence.”

—— Although this was the case, we still needed to hold out for three minutes. I added in my heart, from the side of Asuna's face, I saw a certain expression, and the disturbing feeling vanished. Because this expression —— only the rapier user Asuna in a serious mode would come up with it, I found this out after having went adventuring with her a few times.

"That, defence..... focus....."

"I got it."

She whispered this, but her actions were the opposite, the rapier in the rapier user's right hand suddenly gave off a fierce ray of light.

Twenty minutes later

"H.....How is this possible....."

Leaving this words, the Forest Elf fell with a *pa* on the floor, and as I continued to look at the situation before my eyes, I said the same thing.

"H.....How is this possible....."

No matter how many times we checked the enemy's HP gauge, it was truly at zero. Opposite him, Asuna and I had both lost half our HP, entering the yellow zone. During the beta period, a four man party including me fought the Forest Elf, but we were defeated in two minutes.

".....What, as long as you put your mind to it, you can do it!"

At these words I turned my head, and an extremely tired looking yet straight backed and hands aloft Asuna's eyes finally met mine.

Then our eyes shifted about a meter to the left. Standing there and holding a black saber, was the Black Elf looking at the floor.

Miss, isn't it time you died, this unclear line came to my mind. Looking at the Dark Elf knight Kizmer, I saw her slowly raise her head, looking at me.

Her agate eyes was full of surprise and doubt, the expression in her eyes seemed as though it was asking me, "What am I supposed to do now?". However, this should be my imagination.

I hope that it is my imagination.

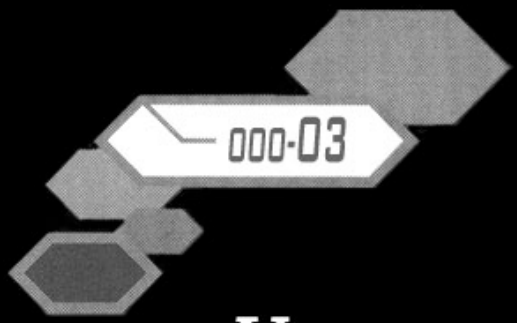
(To be continued)

Afterword

Good day everyone, I am Kunori Fumio. Thanks for reading «Material Edition 9».

This doujinshi contains the first chapter of «Sword Art Online Third floor raid». However.....in January 2012, the first part of «Second floor raid chapters» had ended, and the second floor's boss name did not even appear.....(sweat). regarding those reading the serialized series, you might feel there is an error with regards to the timing, but you can read this story independently. If this thin and small less than thirty pages book is able to bring joy to all of you, then I am really honoured.

This year there is an important matter, which is «Sword Art Online» and «Accel world» is going to be animated and shown on television. I will put great effort in every aspect (of course including my colleagues), so I hope that everyone can support these two works as well!



Versus

Roppongi
April 2026

“Heh..... So this is the «4th-Generation FullDive Experimental Unit».”

I muttered while looking up at the huge enshrined hexahedron in front of me.

The bare aluminum surface was shining dully, with growling sounds from several of the large cooling fans that were lined up . One side of it was linked to the gel bed, the headrest was covered by a protruding crude helmet-based interface.

“So huge, weren’t the machines used in the early days of the amusement parks smaller than this, Higa-san?”

I turned around and said to the man at the control console. The operator raised his face, shrugged and replied,

“Even so, Kirigaya-kun, this is already compact compared to the original estimate. Besides, the specs of the first generation at the olden days’ game centers weren’t much different from Mega Drive or Dream Cast.”

“.....I never saw either of the real machines though.....”

“Well, then let’s have life songs! This time at my apartment, it’ll be a strictly reggae camp.....”

And the man who blurted out strange things was —— Higa Takeru, the researcher responsible for the development of the world’s state-of-the-art VR machine. Looking at him from the outside, it would be hard to believe, as his hairstyle stuck out thinly like a pin holder, he

wore big rounded glasses, and his T-shirt had a game character printed on it. It would be 100 times more matching for him to be in the vicinity of the shops in Akihabara than this gloomy hi-tech room.

But even though I say that, I was still in uniform after school time too.

Why was I —— Kirigaya Kazuto, here at the harbor ward in Roppongi, in the laboratory of a certain venture company? The reason was simple, it was just a part-time job.

From the first-generation of the large scale amusement machine, to the 2nd-generation Nerve Gear or AmuSphere, then to the 3rd-generation medical equipment, the FullDive machines have evolved. Of course, anyone can use it, but there were some with a certain degree of adaptability. That is, their brains could connect to the machine with a high efficiency rate. And in addition to the innate aptitude, the experience could be improved during a long Dive.

Then in Japan, no, the entire world, the group of people who held the longest Dive time was without a doubt, the «Survivors» from «SAO incident» which concluded one and a half years ago.

This 4th-generation machine has been developed under the leadership of Higa Takeru, the level of connection precision was overwhelming compared to the machines up until now. That high specs led to the unexpected problem. Because the amount of information that had to be exchanged with the brain was too great, even with all the staff including Higa-san himself, they were unable to collect data from the test Dive to a satisfactory level due to the «VR Sickness» —— was what he said.

At that point, Higa-san used a certain connection to request one of the «Survivors», me, to be a test Diver as a part-time job, I came here to Roppongi after I confirmed the daily wages, and that was it.

"——Anyway, I am to FullDive with this, then once in there I just move here and there, right?"

I asked for affirmation while stroking the chilled aluminum exterior, Higa-san nodded in consent.

"Oh, I need to warn you that I can see the graphics inside just as you do, like a voyeur. As I'm still developing the mechanism to adjust the connection depth in accordance to a Diver's ability, someone has to dive, or else I can't get the data, hahaha."

".....Well, because I get paid, doing anything is fine.....but before that, I need affirmation for one thing please."

I glanced at the strong headgear interface and continued,

"Erm, there won't be any danger during the Dive..... Is that right?"

"Of course of course of course!"

Higa-san nodded deeply after saying that three times.

"Kirigaya-kun is an SAO survivor, I understand your feelings. It's alright, danger from the machine developed by me, there's only a little!"

"Is that so, I'm relieved to hear tha..."

Swallowing the words I was about to say, I looked at Higa-san again.

".....«there's only a little»?"

"Nonono, It's alright It's alright It's alright!"

After saying that three times each, Higa-san continued in a rapid whisper.

".....Just that, if the power dropped during the Dive, then 'that' for a moment....."

"What is 'that'.....?"

"Nono, no problem! We have two support power sources, and an emergency battery is already equipped too!"

"Please explain 'that' instead....."

"Nonono, no problem! There's no real harm! It just, erm, a bit, how to say it....."

Higa-san rolled his eyes behind the rounded glasses while stepped closer, my glance was fixed on him.

".....How to say it, well, it might appear, just that."

".....What will appear?"

"Hahaha, it's not good Kirigaya-kun. There are things we must not talk about, like bonuses or toilets. In a place like this, the thing that will appear is of course 'that', hahaha."

After saying that, Higa-san hung both hands loosely in front of his chest. That behavior finally let my brain realize what 'that' means.

"Hah.....? G..Ghost.....?"

What is this person saying?, I thought while still staring at Higa-san, who shook his head again and said,

“It’s real, very real, Kirigaya-kun! I actually saw it! .....Well, as you can see, this experimental unit is still the only machine in the world, so there is only a single person during the Dive. But..... the staff saw a silhouette of a person on the grass many times during the test field dive.”

Higa-san said with an expression that should have the thin vertical lines over his forehead if this was a manga.

I had a serious look for a moment, then it was replaced by a bitter smile. I shrugged my shoulders.

“It must be because of the VR sickness, probably the illusions from light effect? Or it could be a bug in the shader program.”

“No—! There is no way such a bug could appear in the program this genius Higa had participated in creating!”

For some reason, his tone suddenly changed to be like a foreigner’s, but I ignored it and moved my shoulders again.

“Still, the ghost didn’t even come out to this room..... About ghosts appearing in the VR world, while in Aincrad when I heard rumors and went to check, it was just an NPC anyway.”

That of course, was about the existence of the top-down AI «Yui» who was my and Asuna’s «Daughter». She would get angry if I tell her that I was searching for a ghost at first.

“.....In other words, everything seen in the other side is all digital code, the existence must be written somewhere in the memory address. By examining the log of the corresponding test Diving time, you can see what the Diver saw.....”

After I said that, Higa-san made a pointed mouth like a child.

“Of course I checked it, but there was nothing in the log. Which means, it was certainly not an object from the main program of the experimental machine. Then it was really a ghost, or.....”

“.....Or?”

“.....Err, this talk is at the level Kirigaya-kun is not supposed to know, so don’t let anyone know you heard it, alright?”

With a strict preface, Higa-san continued,

“At the heart of this experimental machine is «Quantum Operation Circuit», the so-called quantum computer.”

“.....That was also Higa-san’s creation?”

“Oh yea, was what I wanted to say, but its basic foundation was actually what Kayaba-senpai left behind. Well anyway, it is possible that the quantum computer could interfere with a parallel world , well..... the Sci-Fi world.”

“.....That..is really true?”

The tone in my question had changed, Higa-san, half agreeing and half disagreeing, shook his head.

“I hope I know that for certain too, but if it’s true, then it would explain the ghost phenomenon. That is, this experimental machine, for some reason....., interfered with the same kind of the machine in the past or the future from a different time flow, then it could be possible to see the shadow of another Diver.....”

“.....Somehow this is very different from a real ghost, isn’t it”

I shrugged my shoulder again, then glanced at the clock at the wall.

"Appearing or not, we will only know during the Dive anyway. .....Today my little sister will make something, I will be in trouble if I came back after dinner time. So let's start....."

"Heh, Kirigaya-kun has little sisters!? How many!?"

Higa-san's reaction made me feel a strange sense of déjà vu, I ignored the question and sat on the bed of the experimental machine. I lay my body to fit its recesses then slid my head inside the headgear.

"OK, I'm ready."

I said to Higa-san, whose face still showed lingering disappointment. Closing my eyes, the sound of a motor could be heard, the final explanation reached my ears,

".....Then, commencing connection. Avatar will be Kirigaya-kun's «Self-image» that is automatically generated, so it won't cause discomfort."

"Understood."

I raised my left thumb in response. At the same time, a low growl could be heard from the back of the experimental machine.

* * *

————*Again.*

Feeling strange fluctuations in his field of vision, Arita Haruyuki narrowed the eyes of his pink pig avatar.

«Burst Link» command allows one to enter the world dyed in transparent blue, the basic accelerated space «Blue World».

Equipped in Haruyuki's neck was the quantum communication device «Neuro Linker». And installed even deeper inside was the mystery application «Brain Burst». When FullDiving in this transparent blue field, the BB program accelerates Haruyuki's command reactions one thousand fold.

The basic accelerated space was for searching the matching list to find opponents, or to start external applications to do various work, the reason for Haruyuki being «Accelerated» was for the latter. That was —— for the submission of today's homework, to be more precise, the postponed time left was fifteen real life minutes. The Japanese history class during the fifth period had given out the report homework, and of course, the storage region of his brain had forgotten about it even after he registered it in the scheduler application.

Because this was neither mathematics nor English homework, the last resort of asking Takumu or Chiyuri for their homework photograph in order to copy it wasn't an option —— Even though the costly loan, without a doubt, would be collected later —— it was better than having to write the essay report.

Therefore, consuming a precious 1 burst point to «Accelerate», he battered intently at the holographic keyboard. However,

His thoughts shook and swayed when he lifted his face due to the odd observation reflected in his field of vision, in the middle of the empty blue classroom,

".....What.....?"

He muttered when his avatar dropped from the chair. He stared ahead a few steps between the rows of the desk, and part of the

blackboard waved faintly again. It was —— like there was something transparent moving between Haruyuki and the blackboard.

In fact, this wasn't his first time coming in contact with such phenomenon. Recently, here —— about a month ago, sometimes during FullDive he could see the strange fluctuations as well. Moreover, it wasn't in the normal VR world, only while «Accelerated».

However, today's clarity of the phenomenon was unusual. Haruyuki had forgotten about his homework, he stared intently.

Then he immediately noticed something.

".....A person?"

Yes, a fluctuation at the spot in the classroom looked like the silhouette of a human, as if there was a completely transparent human standing there.

But that shouldn't be the case.

The blue basic accelerated space was, as a general rule, the world only for a person who uttered the «Burst Link» command. For two or more to Dive at the same time, both sides must be using a direct connection on the Neuro Linker and use the accelerate command at the same time. But of course, at the moment, Haruyuki wasn't directly connected to anyone.

.....That means.

".....G..Ghost?"

Scared by the word he inadvertently murmured. Haruyuki tried to retreat to the back of the classroom, but at that time.

The clear shadow started approaching him at the same time!

“Hi,hiiiii—!!”

Screaming, while dashing back at a high speed, he unconsciously tried to shout the acceleration halt command.

“B-B-B-B-Burst Ou.....”

But he stopped his steps at that point.

This is not the real world, it is the polygon world created by the image of the Neuro Linkers from the social cameras. Everything reflected in the eyes are all the digital data which could be substituted with the code. Therefore, there must be a reason for the existence of that shadow too, there is no ghost, ghost is just a lie.

Haruyuki thought recklessly while hiding behind the last row of the desk. *Something that looks like human shadow —— what is it? There must be a way to verify it. Assuming it is just other human, this is not a normal VR space but the accelerated space, I didn’t Burst Link with that «Someone». Then if I connect to the network with the same Burst Linker——*

“T-That’s right..... T-T-The name will come up from the Matching List.”

Haruyuki murmured with dry lips. He then quickly hit the «B» icon displayed at the top left of the virtual desktop, the Brain Burst Console screen expanded, he moved the tab to open the Matching List.

On top of the list is my name, then it should be the classmates Takumu «Cyan Pile» and Chiyuri «Lime Bell». In addition, at the lounge of the school cafeteria, is KuroyukiHime «Black Lotus». These four are the only existing Burst Linkers in this Umesato middle school.

Yet.

Floating on the fifth row, the wriggled set of dots was blurred like it was written in ink.

That spot of light, for some reason, didn't take form of the characters immediately. Haruyuki held his breath and watched while trembling intensely, then, he blinked —— a few alphabets finally formed.

There was a fixed form to the Duel Avatar's name, but that name didn't take the «Color Name» form, it was just a row of six characters.

"K.....I, R, I....., T.....O.....?"

——*Kirito?*

Who is he.....?

As if to trace his thoughts, Haruyuki's right hand automatically moved.

He hit the mysterious Burst Linker name, «KIRITO», causing the «DUEL» option to pop through the window, then touched the «YES» affirmation dialog.

The blue classroom melted and disappeared as if it collapsed.

While passing through the space of darkness, Haruyuki's pig avatar was surrounded by the light and changed its shape, The big helmet with thin limbs, silvery white Duel Avatar «Silver Crow».

On both sides of the upper part of his vision, green stamina gauges extended, and the «1800» time count was engraved in the middle.

And finally the flaming text «FIGHT» shone brightly before exploding.

Once his stiff feet touched the surface of the battlefield, Haruyuki quickly raised his face.

'Someone' stood in front, slightly away from him.

Duel Avatar —— no, that isn't it. He thought.

As far as Haruyuki knew, the avatar of each Burst Linker had the appearance of a robot-like hardness. While some wore cloth, there were no flesh and blood faces across the board.

But this 'someone' who stood in front of him clearly had a human's appearance.

A male, with slightly long hair, his sharp eyes were jet black. He seemed to be slightly older than Haruyuki, wearing a black leather longcoat, thimble gloves on his hands, and boots on his feet. Then —— suspended on his back were two long swords.

".....Swords!?"

Murmuring in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki put some more distance between them.

There was no mistake, it was familiar in the fantasy game genre, the so-called «Long Sword». The handles were black and silvery white

respectively, although they were polygons, he could tell from the radiance of the texture that they would be very heavy. He felt that the presence of blades within those scabbards were genuine.

That was not a Duel Avatar, but he didn't think it was the harmless FullDive avatar either.

While cautiously observing his opponent, Haruyuki took a deep breath and shouted,

"Who are you.....!? How exactly did you connect to the Umesato Local Network!?"

The voice tinged with effect echoed throughout the field, but the black dressed swordsman was still motionless.

Disregard that —— rather, it was as if the voice wasn't received in the first place.

Looking closely, the outline of the swordsman avatar was misted like smoke, was it disembodied? —— Was it just the image being sent from somewhere? Haruyuki thought that, and to verify it, he took a step closer.

At the same moment, the swordsman made his move too. The black shiny boot made a step forward, it stepped on the small pebble on the stage ground, causing a sound.

"————!!"

Not the virtual image!

Haruyuki jumped backwards in panic again, he raised both hands in a guarding stance.

As if being induced by that movement, tension ran through the face of the swordsman, his right hand quickly grabbed the handle of the black sword behind his back.

* * *

——*Where exactly is this place?*

——*And, who is that!?*

I earnestly kept repeating these two questions in my mind.

The prior lecture from the operator, Higa-san, was that the Dive field would be a peaceful grassland, but the scenery spread around me was the complete opposite.

The cracked ground, the concrete buildings that had partly collapsed, flames came out of their openings, And —— the starless night sky. It was just like the world after civilization had collapsed.

If the only existence here was me, it would be just an error in the quantum circuit, which I suspected caused my consciousness to jump to the future Tokyo. But fortunately, there was a human shadow just a few meters in front of me.

The silhouette was surely human's, the head was like a big helmet, all of the body was covered in metal armor. The reflection from the bonfire sparkled on that silvery body, which was very slender compared to its big head. It was unthinkable that there would be a human inside it. Further more, its back was carrying something that looked like the radiating fins.

"Robot.....?"

I murmured. As I stepped closer to verify it, the sole of my boots stepped on some rubble causing a sound.

At that moment, the silvery robot quickly jumped backwards —— both hands moved forward into a guarding position.

It had no weapons, but the tip of its sharp fingers glittered. It would be plausible that it had some strong weapons hidden. When I thought that, my right hand moved automatically over my shoulder, grabbing the grip of the sword hung on my back.

——*Sword?*

Then I finally realized that I wasn't Kirigaya Kazuto, the high school student in the real world, but Kirito, the swordsman from the nostalgic SAO period.

Higa said that when I dive, the avatar would be created from my self-image. In other word, currently I wasn't in my own flesh and blood body, but the «Black Swordsman» which shouldn't exist anywhere anymore, I almost made a bitter smile at this thought. However, I wasn't in the situation to do that. Why did the mysterious robot make that stance with both hands? Right, I also grabbed the handle of my sword. I was in a somewhat dangerous situation with this robot.

If I pulled out the sword like this, the robot would attack without a doubt. But it would be hard to prevent that while I'm standing in this awkward form anyway. The fighting spirit is emitting from it and such things don't exist in soulless NPC or monsters. In other word, there must be a real human moving it.

Within the intense atmosphere, I decided to take a chance with words,

"......Um, who are you? This place is my company's closed network. Where are you from and for what purpose are you connecting here?"

But there was no answer, *Looks as if that thing can't hear my voice, then how about gesturing? But to do that in this situation would be difficult. If I move my right hand even slightly, the robot in front of me might jump immediately. The tension of the atmosphere in the space between us is so tense.*

——Yeah, I was in the wrong the moment I grabbed my sword, but you are a bit too aggressive too!

That was what I complained in my mind. The silvery robot had penetrated the company's protective firewall into the experimental machine, it was clearly illegal hacking. Then wouldn't it be more appropriate to be a bit more sneaky.....

When I thought to this point.

After a long time, I finally noticed the indicators fixed at the top of my field of vision.

At the center was the digital figure, the current [1740] had been decreased by one second. Then on both sides, the green shining bars, lined up in parallel with the thin blue bars.

Under the left side bar was the engraved character string [KIRITO]. No matter how I look at it, it was my name —— The Login ID I passed to Higa-san before the Dive.

Then under the right bar was the brightly shining [SILVER CROW] name.

"Silver.....Crow....."

I soundlessly murmured that, it was no doubt the name of the silvery robot in front of me.

The components of this 'screen', and this situation.

I widened my eyes to the revelation that I suddenly realized.

This is —— this world is clearly not the peaceful test field at all.

It was a «Battle Field». Currently I was in a nostalgic fighting game, I Dived into the so-called KakuGē![2]

Higa-san said there was a certain degree of possibility that the quantum circuit mounted within the experimental machine could interfere with the world on a different time flow. If so, then this place may be the world in 1990's era when fighting games were at its peak? No, it can't be. For that era, the 'F' of the FullDive didn't even exist yet. Then is this the future? I don't know how many years into the future, but fighting games will be back in the spotlight in the future?

"Hey, You.....Silver Crow."

Forgetting the fact that my voice wouldn't reach my opponent, I continued saying,

"Is this place within a fighting game? What is the title.....?"

While I was asking,

I carelessly stepped forward while my hand was still on the grip of my sword.

The reaction was —— immediate.

[2] 対戦型格闘ゲーム(taisengataKAKUtoGE-mu), 'fighting game', short for カクゲー

The left foot of the silvery robot avatar kicked the ground, and while I was surprised, the thin body closed in on my bosom like a streak of lightning.

* * *

The left foot had decided due to its own reflexes, and a corner in Haruyuki's head yelled *Crap*—.

The approaching action of the opponent might not have been for attacking purposes, as the sword wasn't pulled out, and he wasn't even in a proper stance with his bosom wide open.

But it was no longer possible to cancel the ultra high speed attack command set by Haruyuki's consciousness. The Silver Crow avatar rushed in at full speed, and threw a preemptive right middle kick aimed towards the flank of the swordsman dressed in black.

Originally, Haruyuki's fighting style wasn't this decisively aggressive. Looking at how he fought his early opponents, he seemed to be gradually changing based on attributes and techniques he gained over time.

In addition, the one in front of him, the strange duel avatar without a color name and with his exposed flesh and blood face, his only feature was the black covering his entire body. If it were red or blue, he might have been controlled from somewhere close by, however, this wasn't the case for black. He should have asked KuroyukiHime-senpai for the characteristics of «Black», but since he was already in the confrontation, it was too late now.

Even against an opponent with unknown characteristics, Haruyuki's preemptive attack with just an insignificant action was

——— clearly, the swordsman in black, «KIRITO»'s tremendous pressure's fault.

If anything, his slender physique, the still developing face that could be called a boy's, but just how he was standing with his hand on the sword grip made Haruyuki's throat dry from the constant feeling of intense pressure. It was likely from a level 7 or 8 High Ranker —— no, higher than that, probably the tension of facing those «Kings» one-on-one.

If the mysterious swordsman had opened a small chance, Haruyuki would rather retreat to hide and ascertain the situation in the narrow path of the «End of the Century» stage. But there was nothing that could be called an opening from the swordsman —— «Kirito». Haruyuki was afraid that his head might fly off from a sudden attack if he tried to retreat, however slightly.

Therefore, as soon as Kirito had taken a casual step, Haruyuki charged ahead with all of his outburst energy.

——But, things have already reached this point, then there's no other choice!

Haruyuki swallowed the depressing thought the moment he drew up the kick.

When facing a fellow Burst Linker, do not «Battle» earnestly. That was what his teacher, and at the same time his 'parent', Black Lotus had taught him. If the middle right kick strikes, it would disrupt the opponent's stance, then the rest would be just to continue rushing at close range without giving any chance for him to pull the sword from his back. And finishing him off with an aerial dive attack when the special move gauge had accumulated to the halfway point.

The first attack loaded with those kind of intentions passed through the opponent's abdomen like a silvery arc in the dark night——

With a light sound, only a button of the coat went flying into the sky.

"Wh....."

While adjusting his balance, Haruyuki forcibly exhaled.

It's impossible. Given the short interval, and that he wasn't in a proper stance, blocking should be difficult enough, but he evaded it completely.

Haruyuki eyes wide opened in confusion. At the same time, the boy's right arm flashed, and with a bright metallic sound, he drew out his jet black long sword.

* * *

It was at an amazing speed.

The silvery white avatar «Silver Crow»'s rush with his middle right kick slipped past my abdomen, its movement was ultra smooth as if it had been repeatedly practiced thousands of times.

However, due to its smoothness, I could feel where the first attack was aimed at.

The one moving Silver Crow was a living human, there's no mistake about it. Then, when the human operates the avatar, there will be the tiny bits of information exposed from its movement which didn't exist in monsters. The significant ones are heart beats, toe direction, waist height, and gaze.

For a duel in SAO, it would be fatal to get hit by a single strike, so it was very important to read the opponent's movement in advance. Therefore when needing to fight with an evenly skilled person, any move fired from a long distance must be avoided at almost a hundred percent rate. Jumping moves need to be blocked, as evading might leave an opening, and a favorite special move is sure to be inserted in between the flow of continuous attacks that followed.

From that perspective, the Silver Crow's middle kick speed was, without a doubt, marvelous. But its movements gave out too much information at the initial moments, I could feel the intention to hit my left flank, so I dashed backwards with all my strength. Settling it with just a single coat button sent flying was already considered lucky.

It seemed like Crow didn't expect the attack to be evaded, the swing caused the upper part of the body to lose its balance. That was a good opportunity, because, even though I positively thought it wasn't a situation I should fight in, my right hand automatically moved to pull out one of my beloved swords —— «Elucidator».

"Shi....."

While feeling the nostalgic weight in my hand, I quickly swung down the sword. With a thin band of blue light, the blade cut into Silver Crow's right shoulder.

* * *

"Ah....."

Haruyuki let leak a weak sound, staring at the looming sharp edge.

Unable to evade, and it couldn't be blocked with an arm either. Kirito's motion from drawing the sword until slashing didn't look powerful at all, it looked so natural, yet the enormous amount of power that was put on the blade made Haruyuki feel like receiving an electric shock through his avatar.

The metallic colors, like Silver Crow, had some resistance to slashing attacks. But he felt it was of no use against this sword, so in that case, he had to make sure to take minimal damage from it.

Although the battle had just begun, Haruyuki's consciousness had started to «Hyper Accelerate» as if he was already at the edge of the jaws of death. The closing blade seemed to slow down slightly, Haruyuki bent his knees, dropping his avatar down at the same time as the incoming slashing vector. The black shiny blade touched his right shoulder's armor, causing pretty orange sparks to fly in all directions. As he had expected, the sword wouldn't stop there, the crack ripped apart Haruyuki's silver armor faster than the speed at which he descended, one centimeter, two centimeters was cut by the blade. At this rate even if he fell down to the ground, the sword wouldn't stop and his right arm would surely be cut off. ——But,

".....Now!!"

The HP gauge was reduced by the damage to the shoulder, and a similar proportion of the special move gauge had filled up with a shiny glow. Haruyuki then converted it to flying force, the silver wings took shape in the form of commas on his back.

At that time, the falling posture gained backwards thrust——

Silver Crow body had only slid by fifty centimeters, but the sword had separated from the cut in the right shoulder.

"……Ooooo!!"

Roaring, Haruyuki kicked the ground with all his might, and jumped a large distance back.

* * *

——*What happened!?*

Feeling the impact from the point of sword biting into empty ground, I held my breath.

The black blade of the Elucidator had caught the shoulder of Silver Crow, there was no mistake about it. It hit the seams of the armor I aimed at, and I was sure just a breath more and it would have been cut off. But the silvery robot suddenly gained backwards momentum and fled away with a cut wound about two centimeters deep.

Such behavior wouldn't be possible in that situation. That completely different movement, it was as if it was being pulled from the back with some wires.

I looked up quickly, staring at the more than ten meters in distance the avatar took in just the blink of an eye.

Of course, there were no wires attached to its body, and I couldn't see any opening Jet holes either.

——*No.*

Folded on the back of Crow were thin metal fins. Did they tremble a split second before the back dash?

If the secret behind the impossible maneuver was those fins, then my initial assumption that they were radiating fins was incorrect —— It must be some sort of propulsion system. But if that was the case, why didn't it use them from the start?

When I thought up to that point, I noticed a slight change from all sorts of information displayed in my field of vision.

First, the Silver Crow's stamina gauge on the upper right had decreased a little, around three percent.

Then, my stamina gauge on the upper left was still full, and the thin blue gauge beneath it had slightly emitted light.

So this field was in compliance with those antique fighting games like I expected, the meaning of the blue gauge was obvious. The «Special Move», no doubt about it. Then this gauge probably charges based on the amount of damage taken. In other word, when Silver Crow was damaged by my sword, the gauge began to accumulate at the same moment, I suspect consuming it created a driving force from the fins on its back. Conversely, if it couldn't charge the special move gauge, Silver Crow wouldn't be able to use those fins anymore.

——But, in that case, what was my «Special Move» when I didn't have that kind of equipment on my back?

Now that I was using the avatar of «Dual Blades» Kirito and with the two beloved swords, my self-image —— In other words, it was created from my memory. If they worked in this fighting game's system, the special moves should be awakened from my memory as well. Then, asking what I will take as special move, I can promptly reply. It's nothing other than «Sword Skill».

I put my right foot forward, set the sword behind, and assumed a basic one-handed straight sword skill «Sonic Leap» stance. Doing so caused the sword to growl faintly, at the same time the shining part of the special move gauge blinked, and then abruptly stopped. This meant the gauge wasn't enough to use the move.

".....I get it now."

I murmured while looking again at the opponent in front of me.

From the reaction of Silver Crow, and from the scene composition, I was apparently the trespasser in this situation.....no, «Intruder» was a more suitable term. It seemed Crow played in this game stage daily, and I, no, the 4th-generation experimental machine's quantum circuit had interfered. I wanted to immediately log out and complain a great deal to Higa for making such a dangerous thing, but there was no log out button in the field of vision, and I didn't know any commands for those purposes either.

But since this was inside a fighting game, once the «Battle» had ended, the connection should be cut off.

If that was the case, it wasn't my hobby to stand still eating the attacks until my stamina gauge was completely depleted either.

Why? I was the «Intruder». It is an appropriate manner to break through using my full power, isn't it?

Since I have been thrown out into this stage, my mouth made a faint smile for the first time.

The switch inside my head made a 'click' changing sound.

* * *

The moment the unknown identity Burst Linker «Kirito» made a little smile, Haruyuki felt goosebumps on his virtual skin. The pain from his right shoulder's wound suddenly disappeared.

Holding his ground against the intense pressure that blew by, the desire to retreat rose up within him.

Kirito had intruded the Umesato Local Network, but it was Haruyuki who saw the name in the matching list and applied the duel mode. Picking the fight then retreating wasn't an option for him, as a member of the legion «Nega Nebulas».

——This is not a situation to be scared of! If we can't talk, then the only way to collect information from him is to use fists directly —— but since that side has a sword —— is there any other way?

At the same time he heard himself saying that, he felt something burning deep inside him.

Kirito's reaction to avoid his full speed middle kick was the fastest he had ever seen fighting with duel avatars up until this point. Wanting to see that movement again, and then surpassing it.

Clenching both his fists hard, Haruyuki decided to rush in again while lowering his body.

The big moves from long distances absolutely wouldn't hit. In addition, the sword had the advantage in reach. If he could slip into the zero distance, he could use small moves to disrupt the opponent's stance.

The sword which looked very heavy shouldn't be able to be swung consecutively. There should be a chance to close in if he could avoid its attack and match it with a counter.

——Keep focusing. Prepare to evade the attack coming from the point of the sword.

The gear in Haruyuki consciousness stepped up, at the same time, his field of vision narrowed down to focus on just the center. All his senses focused onto the tip of the shiny black long sword.

".....Nowww!!"

Yelling, Haruyuki kicked the ground.

Lowering his posture to the limit, he shortened the ten meters distance at once.

Kirito's sword slid down halfway from the beginning middle position.

From the bottom. The point of the sword sent sparks flying over the ground while it slashed upwards to intercept Haruyuki, who was leaning forward. It was like the lethal fangs of the jet black snake——

Haruyuki opened only his left wing, causing his body to rotate almost 90 degrees and avoiding the attack. Even without the gauge, he can still use it to control his posture.

The sword groaned as it was raised, as it made a shallow cut on Silver Crow's chest armor. Heat and light that were at the tip of the sword disappeared shortly. At that moment Haruyuki stepped using his right foot with all his strength, his body raised for a right

uppercut, a silvery light covered fist went straight for Kirito's abdomen——

It was parried just before it could strike. The right fist flowed to the outside, only grazing the shoulder.

But that was still within the calculations. Now both Kirito's hands couldn't return in time. The left short hook was thrown into the body that was left wide open. 'Don', he felt positive feedback. The body wrapped by the coat had stopped.

——*It hit!*

Now rush!!

"Oooo!!"

Haruyuki shouted and at the same time attacked using his right knee, which also hit. The damage wasn't good as the result of the distance which was too short, but it was good enough. Judging the conditions using consecutive moves while the opponent's movement was sealed, then deciding with a blow.

Pinning opponent's left arm with his right, and aiming short strikes with his left. The long sword was useless at this close range, in other words, the opponent's right arm was already considered dead.

At least, that was how it was supposed to be.

The smashing sensation that came from his left fist had dissipated because something pushed it from above. It was Kirito's open right hand, with all his fingers spread.

"Wha....."

W-Where is the sword!?

When that question arose, the next phenomenon had already happened.

The smooth, but terribly fast movement of Kirito's right fist, now touched Haruyuki's chest, suddenly emitting an orange light.

S-Special.....move!!

But, without a weapon——!?

The development was far beyond his expectations, his reaction was just a moment late. But it was too slow in the ultra speed battle.

Don!! With a great impact against the chest, Haruyuki was repelled backward.

However, there the damage was no big deal. It was probably just a move to create some distance. *Just to use this, he chose to drop the sword? Then, I won't give him a chance to pick it back up.*

To Haruyuki, who was hastily closing the distance back in, a further unexpected development happened in front of his eyes.

The empty handed Kirito made a big jump forward. While in the air, Kirito's right hand brandished over his head.

He is trying to pull another sword from his back? No, there is not enough time for that. Then he's going to attack using his hand to chop? Such an attack won't be able to pierce my armor.....

No.

The light which wrapped the right hand still didn't disappear. It meant the special move was still ongoing——

Both Haruyuki's legs went stiff, stopping the retreat he succeeded in earlier. In front of Haruyuki's eyes, Kirito's right hand grabbed on to something.

It was the sword grip. He didn't drop the sword on the ground. He threw it up above.

By the time Haruyuki realized it, the long sword was already wrapped in the color of blinding flame, and it cut down in a straight line.

He couldn't avoid or guard this time. A huge shock went through his chest from the attack on the left shoulder, Haruyuki was swallowed by a light effect and an explosion, then flew diagonally to the back and right.

* * *

"Body-sword composite sword skill, «Meteor Fall». .....But even saying so, he wouldn't hear it anyway."

I muttered while rubbing my abdomen which was hit earlier.

While it wasn't at the same level as if it happened in real world, the strength of the feedback from the pain should be enough to be considered illegal. Just from this pain alone proved this place wasn't in any game operated in year 2026 Japan.

But, with the big move finally making a clean hit, Silver Crow who was blown away in a flashy fashion and whose body was currently half buried under the rubble should have felt more pain. Of course, if a nervous system existed under that metal armor, that is.

Confirming with a glance at the stamina gauge, eating the punch and the knee at that close range took about 15 percent, and Crow's was reduced by nearly 30 percent. Even though it looked like a metal robot, its defense wasn't that high, just like how fighting games were supposed to be.

Then for the fighting game, this difference in damage isn't enough to decide the outcome of the battle. It is not the situation I can relax in just after I got an attack in. Once I decided that, I kicked the ground to follow up with a sneak attack.

Suddenly the silvery body trembled——

The round metal helmet quickly lifted.

I could feel the strong light emitting from both eyes inside it.

Immediately after that, the rubble which buried half the silvery avatar had scattered violently in all directions.

Curling clouds of dust blown up by the wind covered the surroundings. I corrected my sword stance at this distance, waiting for my vision to clear up.

The chilled wind from the bottom of the stage carried the dust away.

Several seconds later, the trace of collapsed buildings appeared again —— but there was no trace of Silver Crow.

"What.....?"

I quickly looked left and right, my sides and my back was a huge open space, in front of me was the wide three-storey building. If it wasn't so tattered and decayed, this could be seen as a small scale school.

All the windows and entrances of the building were blocked with the metal plates, there were no stairs at the outer walls, so I'd notice if Crow cut across my left or right side. In other words, there should be nowhere to go during the brief moment my vision was blocked by the dust. In that case, where exactly did that silvery robot hide?

——*No.*

It isn't hidden. The special move gauge below Silver Crow's stamina gauge is around 30% charged, and even now it's still slowly decreasing. It means he's using the special move. I guess it was the reason he disappeared from my vision. Probably the power to go under the ground? Or the power of transparency?.....

I tensed up all my senses from below my feet, front, back, left, and right. Lowering my waist, softly setting up my sword, I readied my stance to intercept an attack from any direction, waiting for an action.

But.

Where Silver Crow appeared from was beyond my expectations.

Noticing something shining above my head, I quickly looked up

Then I saw it, the protruding sharp right toe, swooping down as if it was a spear from the silvery white avatar, with the big metal fins expanded to the left and right, shining dazzlingly on its back.

So that was really its propulsion equipment. But it shouldn't have the high-speed mobility to move its body above the ground to that degree.

Then those fins are —— wings!

I kicked the ground with as much force as possible to jump to the right.

But the Crow diving in a straight line used the stabilizers on both arms to change its angle, perfectly matching my movement.

“Guh.....”

While I let leak the voice, the sword in my right hand tried to parry the sharp toe.

But, defending against the attack with that degree of weight wasn’t possible. Just like when receiving a heavy rush from the Salamander in ALO —— No, with greater force than the sword at that time, the dive kick directly hit my right shoulder.

* * *

For Silver Crow, who spent all of his level-up bonuses on expanding his flying ability, his greatest weapon is a swooping attack from high altitudes.

Just that would allow it to hit? Over the long period of time, Haruyuki had earnestly researched the technique for the half a year since becoming a Burst Linker. Although it was still too soon to be considered complete, it had become a very important asset of his.

Power, or descending speed, and accuracy, or homing capability, both present together.

All the power of the wings was used for acceleration, while the arms and body did the orbit adjustment. To get the hang of it, he couldn’t count how many times he had bitten the ground in vain.

However, the effort wasn't fruitless. He was able to capture Kirito, despite his formidable reaction speed.

——*No.*

Haruyuki shook the head in his mind. The dive kick directly hit the right shoulder, while on the ground, unable to escape, but his eyes could still follow Haruyuki's action.

Apparently, Kirito didn't know Silver Crow was an aerial type Duel Avatar. For those Burst Linkers he fought on a daily basis, the moment they lost sight of Haruyuki in the cloud of dust, they would be cautious above their heads, rather than the surroundings. But Kirito did the opposite, which opened the opportunity for Haruyuki's kick to hit. Thinking about it, the reaction ability to attempt to step and parry at that moment was really frightening.

Glancing at the HP gauge to confirm, Kirito's HP was just below 50 percent and had changed to yellow. Although the amount of damage had reversed the situation, but because the opponent already knows of his flying ability, it would be difficult for Haruyuki's kick to get a clean hit again. If that was the case, then he couldn't stop his hand now.

Haruyuki spread his wings for the second time, he started a low altitude dash towards the shadow crouching on the ground.

Kirito's sword manipulating arm was hit with the big move. The shock reverbrating in his nerves should remain for at least ten more seconds, he wouldn't be able to swing the sword at full speed till then. Then, with this rush, the result of this battle will be decided!

"U.....oo!!"

With a short roar, Haruyuki got close to Kirito, then swung a big roundhouse kick diagonally upwards.

The method of using wings wasn't just swooping from high altitudes. At short range melee, the three dimensional actions, ignoring the gravity and inertia, was possible. This kick was also impossible to deal with.

The growl released from his right feet, which looked like a laser cutting across the space.

Of course, Kirito's right hand didn't move.

Sure hit——!!

While Haruyuki felt confident, at that moment,

Both of Kirito's eyes behind his long bangs shone brightly.

The left hand wrapped behind the black leather coat became hazy and disappeared.

KIA$_{aa}$n!! The high-pitched crashing sound. The blinding spark. Then the searing heat sensation.

The mid-air kick was repelled, then Haruyuki slapped down to the ground due to the returning momentum. He understood what had happened at that point.

In Kirito's left hand, which was still on his knee, raised high with the bright white shining like cat's eye[8], was a second sword.

The swordsman dressed in black stood up while still swaying, in both of his hands were the white and black long swords moving in an arc——

With a JyaKiiin!, Both hands let out the clear sound.

* * *

I must admit.

I just had witnessed the opponent, Silver Crow's, endless power.

That name was so suitable with its meaning, the avatar's potential was mostly based on its flying ability. In other word, in ALO, it was what allowed me to press my advantage over the air raid ability specialists, Sylphs, in the aerial combat.

If that was the case, I would like to settle this battle with a mid-air combat. However, now my avatar isn't the Spriggan Kirito in ALO, but the SAO's Dual Blades Kirito. There were no wings on my back, and of course I couldn't fly.

In that case, if I don't squeeze all I have to use in this fight, there would be no chance of winning.

Thoughts about this battle being the result from the abnormality of the quantum circuit had disappeared from my mind. My whole body was wrapped around with the tension I've tasted dueling with truly formidable foes.

It had been one and a half years since feeling the trustworthy weight of the Elucidator in my right hand, and the Dark Repulser in my left. I slowly stood and stared wordlessly to the silvery white avatar.

The pale sparks scattered all over the deep wounds at its chest and left foot, around 40 percent of its HP bar remained. Thin smoke smoldered from the right shoulder, my bar had a similar amount.

However, there were still some tricks under the sleeves on both sides, the victor shall be decided by the following clash.

The wings on the back of Silver Crow stretched wide.

* * *

Watching the mild silhouette of «Kirito», who was carrying two swords in standing position, Haruyuki finally realized the true identity of the pressure he felt since the beginning of the battle.

It was similar.

To the pressure from the Black King, «Black Lotus».

More than the form of both swords, or wearing color on the whole body, the most similarity was the «Immeasurable».

Truthfully, Haruyuki almost never watched KuroyukiHime fighting at her full power. From his memories, once conducted in the unlimited neutral field, in the battle against the similarly level 9 Yellow King, that time had left him with the impression that both sides still had spare energy left.

That feeling of bottomless strength. If this person had become seriously serious, just what kind of fury would be unleashed?

The same thing could be felt here, what this Burst Linker Kirito had behind his back.

——What if this guy really is as strong as KuroyukiHime-senpai, I won't have any chance to win.

Haruyuki's mind was so determined.

But why was the inside of his chest armor full of wounds burning hot? It wouldn't cool down at all. Far from that, it even blazed more and more, sending heat to the tip of his limbs.

I want to fight. Burn all of Silver Crow and then all of Arita Haruyuki to the exhausting limit, I want to beat this strong foe.

Recalling the moment when the slowly walking figure of the dual blades swordsman caused him to unintentionally shout Burst Out in fear, a subtle smile floated under the silver mask.

It might seemed like the difference in numerical potential of avatars was big, but he was bad at manipulating his consciousness efficiently. Kirito was one step ahead in the ability to analyse situation and ability to react. Even though it was just their first meeting, Haruyuki had ended up behind on everything.

In that case, the only way was to bet on the cornerstone of his humble self-confidence, his «Speed».

Believe in the wings on the back, produced from the craving for speed. Concentrate.

".....Cross it. Go beyond it."

Just as he murmured, the hue of his field of vision had shifted slightly.

The background noise disappeared, and the movement of the sparks drifting in the air became gradually slower.

However, he didn't sense these changes, as all of Haruyuki's spirit was focused on his dual bladed opponent.

* * *

«Silver Crow»'s spirit's state had changed, I felt that fact.

Probably, the opponent also determined this as the climax of the battle. The wings on the back opened wide, but he didn't take off, just slowly lowering his waist and setting up both his hands, a natural posture to receive my attack.

Betting everything on the line, where all hope was placed.

I finally noticed I made a blurred thin smile on my mouth.

I really longed for this kind of battle. I might have been in many serious battles in ALO or GGO, and even have trouble surviving in a few of those, but up until now there was never a time I tasted the pain from the sense of tension before.

It was really strange. I wasn't sure why Silver Crow and I were fighting in the first place. It was only the experimental machine's troubles that had led to the accidental encounter with him but——

.....No.

That is why, how to say it? The battle wasn't in the well known game, and everything was wrapped under mysterious circumstances, causing me to feel excited.

It wasn't just that. Carrying the [KIRITO] name tag, holding my beloved swords in both hands, being half hearted was not allowed.

".....From here on, you'd better go all out."

I uttered in a low whisper——

My right foot made a big step forward, readying the sword skill motion.

Both swords were bathed in a vivid orange light.

At the next moment, I started a long distance charge, aiming at Silver Crow like a bullet fired from a cannon.

Dual blades rush sword skill, «Double Circular».

* * *

The shape of Kirito, who was controlling the trajectory of the twin shining swords which penetrated the depth of the darkness, like a flame from a fire dragon.

He kicked his fear of wanting to flee to the sky away, Haruyuki just waited.

His consciousness had been geared up to the limit, but it all happened in just the blink of an eye.

In front of Haruyuki, Kirito's body rotated upward. The black sword in his right hand pulled the helix of the flame from below and slashed straight up furiously.

The point of the sword split Haruyuki's left hand's armor open and bounced it upwards.

Silver Crow's wrist armor possessed the highest strength of the entire body. Despite that, the sword ripped the arm apart in the middle, the pretty sparks from the slash wound flowed into the night sky.

"Ku.....!"

Haruyuki leaked a voice that came from his throat through his mouth, but the lethal attack would be the following strike.

Following right behind the slashing trail remaining in mid-air, the white sword in Kirito's left hand thrust in a straight line. The tip was aimed with fearful accuracy at his neck, it was much faster than the attacks from any previous confrontation with Burst Linkers —— be it bullets or laser.

Haruyuki's aim was to catch hold of that blade.

However, he couldn't see any possibility of success at all. Even avoiding it wasn't allowed, it would be accurate to say it was an attack at the speed of god.

Therefore, Haruyuki decided to spread his palm, at the risk of losing his right hand —— used the center of his palm to catch the tip of the sword.

He felt all the resistance of the sword piercing his hand, but continued stretching. The speed of the thrust dropped just slightly, however, it gave Haruyuki a moment of opportunity to twist his neck away. The weak vibration transmitted from the right side of his neck, the blade deeply cut there and split out at the back.

Stamina gauge is, 10 percent remaining.

This bet is——

My win!!

As his consciousness shouted, Haruyuki used his right palm which was penetrated by the sword to grab Kirito's left hand.

"U.....oooo!!"

Yelling, both feet kicked the ground, both wings slapped the air, Haruyuki's fully charged special move gauge was burnt to exhaustion to let him fly into the night sky.

In the midst of full acceleration, he turned his body around. The momentum of inertia was still positive, he then threw Kirito's body above down with all his might.

The sword was extracted from the palm, along with a thin line of sparks. Without the violently built up momentum, the dual blades swordsman without wings was no longer ascending.

In that situation, what surprised him was, there was no sign of struggle from the swordsman at all. His limbs weren't twirling, both hands and feet were spread out, trying to control his posture.

However——

Once this happened, there was nothing he could do.

Most Burst Linkers might not be aware of the basic rule governing physical attacks, which was the reaction to the action.

Be it a punch or kick, sword or blunt weapon, the foot must be firmly planted, without a ground of mass to place a foot onto, power wouldn't arise. This was the reason melee attacks were weak in the «Ice and Snow» stage, where the ground under the feet was abnormally slippery.

Then in mid-air, there was no ground.

Even if Kirito swings the sword, the blade will not have that formidable power anymore.

On the other hand, Haruyuki could use driving force from the wings to kick the air. So even if both strike each other, he should be able to do a lot more damage.

“Now.....”

Losing the ascending momentum, staring at Kirito’s silhouette once it reached the topmost point, Haruyuki yelled.

“Is the endddddddddd!!”

Douuu, the sound of air rang in the ears.

He put his right foot as the pivot point for the rushing momentum, and shot off a long ranged roundhouse kick.

Kirito tried to intercept it using his left sword, however his defence was abruptly bounced back with a high-pitched sound, the kicked pierced deeply into his flank.

Haruyuki then dashed after the black dressed figure which flowed down through the air like a bullet. His next attack was deflected by the crossing hands, he then headbutt using his helmet. Along with a heavy impact, it violently hit the center of Kirito’s chest.

At this point, the stamina gauge of both sides had 10 percent remaining.

The aerial gauge had less remaining. But it was just enough to spend on the next decisive attack.

Exerting as much power as possible in his right fist, Haruyuki began the final rush.

At that moment——

Both Kirito's eyes suddenly widened. Haruyuki noticed his longcoat which was streaming violently over the entire body, wrapped in a thin red aura.

The black long sword in the right hand was enveloped in a blood-like crimson light.

——*Special move!*

——*I don't fear it!!*

Haruyuki clenched his teeth, and continued straight in. *That was just a long range thrusting attack, but during mid-air with no ground to step on, with the body flowing backwards. That kind of move wouldn't go through Silver Crow's armor!*

"U.....o.....!"

Haruyuki roared. In front of his vision,

Kirito's body turned around.

Giiiin! With a loud jet engine-like sound, the tremendous power could be felt vividly from the straight thrusting move fired from the right hand, brightly penetrating the night sky.

——Approaching Haruyuki, in exactly the opposite direction.

"Wh....."

Kirito's body received reaction from the strong thrusting attack and retorted ferociously towards a gasping Haruyuki.

The sword in his left hand glazed the glistening pallid crescent moon in Haruyuki's vision——

Cut into the center of the chest. Haruyuki could feel both hot and cold at the same time where the point of the sword touched.

————*What's with this guy.*

All the remaining special gauge was used not on the attack but to get the driving force for a single moment.

Admiration crossed his mind. But at the same time, Haruyuki's consciousness attempted a final counterattack.

The right fist pushed straight across the sword trail. But the reach wasn't enough. He then reflexively stretching his fingertips, making the shape of a hand-knife. The sharp fingers lined up, glistening white like a sword.

————*Reach it!! At least, I'll convey my final struggle until the end!!*

The white sword pierced through Silver Crow's chest.

Silvery fingertips touched Kirito's coat.

At that moment, Kirito's avatar soundlessly changed into white light particles.

The sword which lost its substance went past Haruyuki's body, Haruyuki's right hand also passed through Kirito's body.

Both of them made contact in mid-air, the bodies blended together.

In the passing moment, Haruyuki felt a sound within his head. A soft, yet dignified, and comfortable voice resounded.

『It was a good duel. Someday —— let's fight again.』

Then, the mysterious Burst Linker «Kirito» body vanished from the imagination field.

In Haruyuki's center of vision, for the first time he sees, the system message [DISCONNECTION] blinking.

* * *

".....iichan. Onii-chan!"

I raised my gaze to the source of the voice, on the other side of the table, from the sharp lips of Suguha.

"Ah, s-sorry. What was it again?"

"Since just now that your hand hasn't moved much at all, isn't the food good? That was what I asked!"

To Suguha who made a sully look once more, I quickly shook my head.

"T-That's not it. It's delicious, this oden. "

I filled my large open mouth with a potato, and showed a nodding gesture, but Suguha's mood wasn't getting better.

".....This isn't oden though, it's Pot-au-feu. "

——*Pot-au-feu with whole eggs only, huh*, of course that thought didn't leave my mouth. I quickly emptied the plate and asked for a refill, trying to settle the mood.

Our mother was late as usual, so today's dinner was just me and Suguha. At that point I went back into silence, causing the table to be quiet again. But while eating seconds of the french-style oden,

my thoughts were pulled back to the experience of the strange incident which occurred this afternoon once more.

It was about four hours ago, at the mysterious battle game field, the serious battle with the unknown avatar «Silver Crow» had unfolded, but regrettably just before the result would be decided, my connection was cut off.

I told Higa Takeru about what happened after jumping out of the experimental machine.

However, Higa had a doubtful face about the fact, so I connected back into that game, this time for the exchanging of information rather than sword and fist.

What I saw in the second Dive was —— as described in the beginning, just a scene of a lovely forest. There was no stamina gauge nor time count on the field of vision, the battle opponent also wasn't present. After we took the data as planned, Higa and the other staff also Dived just in case, but no one saw the mysterious human shadow at all.

So, the quantum circuit of the experimental machine was somehow «Fixed». It could be said that the machine was thoroughly satisfied from my battle with Crow.....

That battle was probably just a dream I had from FullDiving in the 4th-generation machine for the first time. And for now, the part-time job was over, Higa told me that just as I was about to leave the laboratory.

However, I couldn't believe such explanation, from the Silver Crow's splendid movements, the flame of fighting spirit burning at

an ultra-high temperature, to the duel which was like to burn each other down, it couldn't be just a dream.

"What are you thinking of for a while now?"

I woke up from my thoughts after hearing Suguha's voice.

So as not to offend her again, and also to get her involved in what was in my mind, I used my fork to pick a Vienna into my mouth, and said,

"Hmm..... Today, I dueled with an amazing opponent. But due to circuit irregularity, I can't say I won....."

"Heh? Onii-chan's battle with an unknown player ended up in a draw? Does such a person exist?"

Attracted to my story, Suguha's body leaned forward. Apparently she thought it had happened in ALO, I left it that way in order to keep the contract I made to not disclose information about the experimental machine.

"How to say it..... Amazing, naturally flying. It was like seeing a real voluntary flight."

".....? What do you mean?"

Suguha tilted her head, while still holding her fork.

"Well, for the voluntary flight in ALO, you really don't just use thoughts to control the wings, it actually requires the use of shoulder blade movement too. During acceleration would be like this....."

I pulled both arms backward, causing both shoulder blades to get closer.

“Then, during deceleration.”

This time the arms was stretched out in front, the gap between shoulder blades opened wider.

“With experience, the actual movement can be minimized, but I don’t mean it can be completely eliminated. That’s why it interfered with the attack during the air raid.”

Suguha gave a big nod at my words.

“That’s right. When swinging the sword, stretching the arm cannot be avoided and at the same time, it acts as a brake command to the wings too. The attack which completely kills the momentum of a full speed flight, only the lance type weapon is an exception due to its stance being based on the waist. But that can’t be helped anyway, because humans don’t have real wings, so we have to substitute it with some part of the body.”

“Yeah..... But that guy could move his limbs without causing any conflict with the wings at all. Even during the fierce full speed dash, he could still accelerate while throwing the fist forward.”

“Ehh—, something like that can’t be possible.”

I show a slight smile to Suguha who made the rounded eyes.

“Yeah, it’s not possible. Maybe it was too fast to notice..... Or he wasn’t human but a birdman so he could operate the wings separately, something like that.....”

————In that world, something exceeding my understanding of a man-machine interface existed.

Yes..... Perhaps, unlike the AmuSphere which picked up the body's movement commands from the medulla oblongata, it read the image directly from the brain, no, the consciousness.

It couldn't be possible. Consciousness, or rather, to access such things as the soul itself.

But without thinking that way, Silver Crow's movements couldn't be understood.

Changing the image power, that is the human mind, into data, which was the actual power in the real word. Yes, if we think about it, hadn't that experimental machine read my «Self-image» and created the swordsman Kirito's avatar? In other words, Higa's 4th-generation FullDive machine communicated with the soul rather than the brain cell..... It could be said that, in that world, there's the possibility that the Diver can pull out and use the ultimate kind of power, which is the «Mind Power».

I closed my eyes tightly once, then looked at Suguha and finally smiled.

".....W-What are you smiling for, Onii-chan?"

Towards the discomforted Sylph swordswoman, who acts like a possessed speed-holic in the sky, I said,

"By some chance, one day.....no, in the surprisingly near future, we might be able to really fly. Not a pseudo-voluntary flight.....but flapping the wings created by the mind."

Suguha blinked in surprise——

Her whole face smiled cheerfully.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

I nodded in return, and bit the Vienna, my mind returned to that figure once more.

Flying across the dark night sky, the beautiful silvery white crow.

* * *

“.....yuki-kun. Oi, are you listening, Haruyuki-kun?”

He lifted his face in a hurry at the call, as KuroyukiHime emitted a perilous glare on the opposite side of the round white table.

“Ah, s-s-sorry! I was just thinking about something.....”

“Ho, I wonder what kind of important consideration has distracted you during this discussion with me.”

Haruyuki gulped, and drank iced latte from his paper cup to stall for time.

There were no other students in the quiet cafeteria lounge after school. But Haruyuki still looked around just in case, affirming the conversation wouldn’t be heard by anyone else, before mumbling the answer.

“Erm, well, the truth is.....I had fought with a strange Burst Linker.....”

Those words intentionally omitted the ‘during today’s lunch break’ part. Furthermore, the lunch break when the unidentified enemy showed up in the school’s local network, was comparable to the big «Dusk Taker Incident» which happened in spring. Actually, after that battle, all the members of Nega Nebulas must be warned

immediately, but Haruyuki didn't do so as he felt the enemy wasn't real.

Because he felt neither maliciousness nor hostility from that battle opponent. All he could feel from him was excitement and joy. Despite waging a fierce battle, Haruyuki was left with some sort of freshness in his mind.

Maybe he won't show up again.

While he still didn't know why he was so convinced about that, Haruyuki started speaking piece by piece.

".....It was weird, but he was amazing. His weapons were two swords.....Which he could swing as if they were weightless, I was almost unable to track his special moves."

"Two.....swords."

KuroyukiHime furrowed her small eyebrows while murmuring to herself. But she stared blankly at Haruyuki then immediately returned to her normal facial expression while encouraging him to continue.

"No, there's nothing. Then? Did you win?"

"Ah, well.....he was disconnected just before the conclusion.....but, if it continued, I am sure I would lose. My final attack probably couldn't reach him."

"Ho. Being able to defeat you in close combat. What's the color and level of that person?"

Haruyuki shook his head with a troubled face to KuroyukiHime's question.

“About that, either it was a system error or he used some kind of a filter..... color name and level were both not shown. Just the color of his appearance was, well....., really black.”

Towards the «Black King» who narrowed her eyes again, Haruyuki didn’t think too deeply into her reaction, and threw the question he had thought of during the battle at her.

“Oh, senpai. I wanted to ask this for a long time now, what are the characteristics of the «Black»?”

KuroyukiHime blinked blankly then showed a big bitter smile.

“Suddenly asking such a question...Haruyuki-kun.”

“Eh? No, erm, s-sorry!”

Haruyuki unintentionally shrank the upper part of his body, this time a smile which was like from an intelligent older sister towards her younger brother, floated on KuroyukiHime’s face.

“No, there was no need to apologize. Because, to that question, «I also do not know».”

“.....Heh?”

“That said, there will be a certain degree I’ll have to guess.”

The glass containing iced tea made a ringing sound, KuroyukiHime stared at the pale afternoon sunlight, then explained,

“The three primary colors on the upper part of the color circle..... «Neighboring Blue», «Remote Red», and «Indirect Yellow». And then there are properties in the middle «Green» and «Purple». With the exception of metal colors, almost all of the Duel Avatars are

classified somewhere between those links. As the purity of the color goes higher, the characteristic purity also increases."

Up until that point was what Haruyuki already understood. For example, his friend Cyan Pile had a fairly bright blue color which slightly tilted in the purple direction. So his initial equipment «Pile Driver» was combined with the ranged attack power.

Seeing Haruyuki nod in response, KuroyukiHime continued,

"Conversely, as the color purity lowers so does the characteristic purity. For your friend «Ash Roller», he is more like the green than the grey type. That is because he spent most of his potential into strengthening the exterior of his unique bike. At the same time the purity of his color had declined. But why an avatar's color is darkened, while another is brightened, I still can't give a proper explanation yet."

"Become darker.....or brighter....."

Repeatedly murmuring, Haruyuki finally understood. When an avatar's color rapidly darkened, the destination was surely black —— the «Pure Black». And conversely, white existed, the «Pure White», when going brighter as well. It was probably very unique on both extreme ends, but he couldn't understand clearly the reason behind the divide of both black and white being the exact opposite.

While Haruyuki twisted his neck, KuroyukiHime suddenly murmured,

"«Black» is the «Rejected Color» —— It's what I've been aware of for a long time."

"Eh....., r-rejected.....?"

"Yes, refused to be dyed in any color, the color of possessing nothingness, it couldn't go anywhere else other than that, the bottom of the deep well of color....."

With those desolate words, KuroyukiHime shook her head before Haruyuki could speak. Then her light colored lips showed a faint smile.

"But....., just but. Maybe it isn't really that way, recently I started to think like that, thus....."

Suddenly she moved her delicate right hand over the luxurious table, and grabbed hold of Haruyuki's left hand, causing him to be taken aback.

".....Because you had held my hand many times. This me who couldn't interact with other people, always reminding me."

Haruyuki's face was red to his ears from the unusually gentle pupils gazing at him, he gripped her cold hand in return and would not let go. His heart throbbing, but unable to say a decent line, he just grabbed her hand as if trying to pass his earnest feelings from his heart with the touch of the fingers.

——Black is absolutely not the rejected color. Because it was you, without a doubt, who stretched her hand to me who was alone in the bottom of the well, who gently wrapped and healed my wounds.

——That's right, that guy was the same.

——That black swordsman was also had a similar tranquility. Receiving everything, both giving great support and strength.

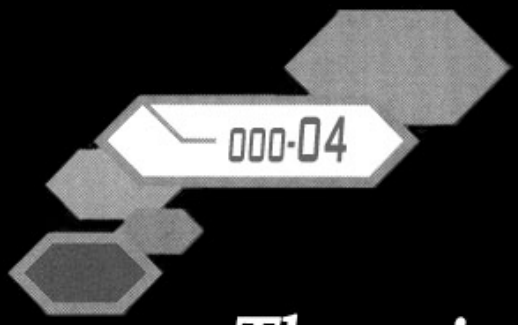
Haruyuki felt the «Kirito» inside his mind was pushing his back, he timidly lifted his face, and somehow managed to speak.

“Erm....., well, black objects don’t reflect any light, causing it to looked black, it is what I learned in class. So.....so, it surely isn’t the lonely color. I think it’s the warmest color, more than any other color.”

KuroyukiHime widened her eyes for a moment—— then,

A beautiful smile floated on her face like a blooming lotus bud.

Guest Illustrator / abec



There is but one ultimate way

Centoria, Underworld
August 2026

〔ソードアート・オンライン：外伝Ｘ２〕
たったひとつの究極的なやりかた

２０１０年５月

＊ご注意＊
この短編小説は、電撃文庫版『ソードアート・オンライン』において未出の情報を多量に含んでいます。
ネタバレにご注意ください。

イベント当日の午前2時から5時までの間に書き上げた作品です（笑）内容は……いつものキリト氏といつものアスナさんといつもの直葉さんといつものリズさんといつものシリカさんといつものシノンさんといつものユイさんといつものアリスさんです。いやアリスはいつもじゃないか……

SAOという作品は、巻を増すごとにヒロインが増え、しかも主人公のキリト氏がまるではっきりした答えを出さないというまことにけしからん構造のお話なのですが、その状況にどうにか結論を見出すとすればこのような形しかあるまい。と思ってこの短編を書いてみました。
今回改めて再読したんですが……ひどいですねいろいろと。でもまあある意味これがSAOシリーズの本質なのかなとも思わなくもありません（笑）。

Web版の『アリシゼーション編』で導入された《主観時間加速》というアイデアは、その後『アクセル・ワールド』シリーズにも用いられています。あちらも、主人公ハルユキ君を取り巻く女性の数は増える一方ですが、キリト氏とは色々性格の異なる彼は状況にいったいどういう結論を出すのか、私も楽しみにしつつ今後もシリーズを続けていきたいです。

As I woke up from the bed, the gentle sun shone in through the white lace curtains at the window. This itself is a very ordinary scene without any problems or drastic changes. Just as I was ready to continue my deep sleep, my eyes that were about to be closed suddenly opened like a boom. ———— Hold on ... Hold on a minute!

This... this... this is too weird.

First of all, this bed is unusually large and soft.

I —— Kirigaya Kazuto should only be using a foam filled single bed in my bedroom.

But now, my back felt like it was coated by the highest grade of soft feathers. Even as I moved my left hand, It did not touch the wall that should exist. What covered me was not my ordinary fluffy blanket, but a smooth and soft silk one.

Also, the ceiling was inexplicably high, and I had no idea if the decorations were of the western style or Japanese style. In addition to that, a beautiful classical chandelier hung there in place of LED lights.

Finally, coming in from the gaps of the window covered by heavy curtains at the other side of the room —— It was so large, maybe it was a twin window —— was the light of the winter sun at a low angle.

Isn't this the middle of summer?

At the end of August, the summer vacations will just end in a few days, so I was filled with anxiety and despair, giving up, when I faced the facts: just yesterday morning, I had to withstand being scorched by the violent sun, I recalled forcing myself to climb out of bed in that condition.

However, at this moment, I was in this unfamiliar luxurious room, and it was incredibly cold, such that if I was not well covered by the blanket, I probably wouldn't stand the cold. No matter how I looked at it, this is winter, a winter morning... what on earth is this...

At this time, I finally remembered.

Yesterday morning, I woke up in the middle of the heat, drowsily brushed my teeth and changed my clothes. While considering doing my summer homework, and reluctantly walking to the table, I received a phone call from the person who was the one responsible for the RATH development department —— Higa, and the content was an official statement. The blockade in UW had some problems, and he wanted me to help solve the problem. Thus, on that ridiculously hot day, complaints came out of my mouth. However my heart was lively enough, as I took my bike straight to RATH's branch in Roppongi, following the instructions on the screen to go into the STL. Without even bothering to find out the circumstances, I Dived in —— and woke up in that room.

In other words, this is probably a room in the building in UW's *Among the Stars* «Cardina», capital of Centoria. As long as I have used the STL, I was still a little afraid of the effects of the time acceleration function, as my memory before the Dive would be a little fuzzy. If I wanted to forget, why not simply forget even more

things... for example in the real word, the fact that there were three days before summer vacation ends...

...While having these thoughts, I decided to get up before saying anything, then stretched my body wide.

Then, as my hands and fingers reached out, they met a soft and warm object, causing me to be taken aback slightly.

I slowly looked to my right.

There, with her left cheek buried in the large pillow, having a peaceful expression, and making gentle sleeping sounds, lay a chestnut haired girl. It was possibly a face I had more memories of than myself, it was Asuna, Yuuki Asuna's.

What on Earth happened?

After being called by Higa, the only person Diving should have been me. Even if after that they encountered a problem and Asuna Dived in as well, why would we be sleeping on the same bed?

But before going into that, I needed to confirm something else first.

I carefully turned around gently, this time to my left.

Suddenly, a radiant golden light pierced my eyes.

Even though the sunlight in winter was weak, it still reflected the brilliant glorious hair of gold radiantly. With similar colored eyelashes and translucent white skin, the girl lying in a posture face to face with Asuna on the right —— Alice, the Integrity Knight - Alice Synthesis Fifty.

This situation was beyond my understanding. However, it was just the beginning of the shock that heaven delivered.

On Alice's other side, there was yet another person's figure.

I opened my eyes and mouth, and slowly moved my line of sight upwards.

There, asleep and curled up like a cat, was a aqua-colored short haired girl, the ice sniper, Sinon, Asada Shino.

If this is the case, maybe... ma-y-be——

I turned the right to face Asuna's direction.

Underneath the silk blanket, with her face facing upwards, in an upright sleeping posture was the yellow-green haired, pony tailed girl, the Green Swordsman, Lyfa... my little sister, no, actually my cousin sister, Kirigaya Suguha.

.....How big IS this bed?! Was what I asked myself in my heart.

Even if five people slept on top, there was still some extra space, so I wouldn't be surprised if the bed was about 8 tatami (or about 4 square feet). It would be really troublesome to change the sheets of a bed of this size.

At this moment, something pressed against my right foot.

Based on my angle of sight, it wasn't Asuna —— as I forced my brain to stop thinking, shifting my thinking pace to a slower gear, I raised my head again, to look at my feet.

Using my foot as a pillow, with pink hair covering the freckled face of the girl, was the master blacksmith —— Lizbet, Shinozaki Rika.

And beside her, with her tea colored hair falling to both sides, a delicate girl sleeping with a small feathery dragon clinging to her chest, the beast tamer —— Scilica, Ayano Keiko.

It wasn't 8 tatami, it was more like 10 tatami. The Arabian royal family was probably the only people who would think of using this kind of bed in the real world.

Despite being in a virtual world like UW, even those with administrative privileges would have no way to arbitrarily create items, so this bed would still require a woodcutter to cut the wood, then combined together by a carpenter, finally getting manufacturer to set it up before it could be called a bed. This should be extremely troublesome work.... just how much would this bed have cost?

While I was engaged in thoughts escaping reality, this time, covered by the blanket between me and Asuna, in the one meter space there, something slowly moved.

This source slowly climbed to my chest starting from my stomach, and from the edge of the blanket a head emerged.

8 years old, a young girl with gorgeous flowing dark hair, with her sleepy eyes, moved closer to look at my face, then blinked, smiled and said,

"Good morning, Papa!"

"En... Good morning, Yui."

If this bed was 10 tatami, then the room must exceed 30 tatami.

An hour after I woke up, me, Asuna, Yui, Alice, Sinon, Lizbet, Lyfa, Scilica and Pina, a total of eight people plus one, sat together in a circle at the table in the southern part of the room.

Now, the girls stayed in the kitchen together to prepare tea and Siral water. While drinking the citrus drink with a familiar taste, I asked aloud,

“Hey, where are we?”

It was Alice who replied,

“Based on the visible scene outside the window, we should be in the north of Centoria’s outskirts, in what used to be the private territory of the «Aristocrats» of this area.”

After talking in an unchanging resolute tone, she pulled her golden hair closer to one side, while moving her teacup closer to her lips.

“Er... em... I’ve never came here before, moreover, we secretly crossed the border to this place, we will be locked in prison...”

After I said this, Lyfa opened her eyes wide and said, “Whoa, really harsh, Onii-chan can live for a few years in a secure place.”

“Ahaha, it is indeed like this, but challenging the rules and making the GM angry is a special ability Kirito is proud of.”

After Asuna’s comment, everyone laughed together.

Although it is kind of late to say this after everyone woke up on the same bed, all seven girls were dressed in white pajamas of similar design, so the situation now was full of an immoral feeling. Even though the clothes texture looked very thin, because there was a strong heater, the room was quite warm. Even I merely wore my ordinary black cotton pajamas.

If I was not at the table, it would have looked like a beautiful impressionist painting.

But even so, I couldn't say "Now everything is up to you" and then escape out of the windows.

No... perhaps it was a situation that occurred by force... Even though I was afraid of my own foreboding, but something had to be clearly confirmed. I finished off the Siral water that was now lukewarm in one gulp, then put the cup on the table. Everyone's attention was drawn to me. After clearing my throat, I finally asked this question,

"....That... this situation is really...? I totally did not know that everyone Dived in here together..."

Suddenly, the girls began exchanging glances, thus I understood.

They had already finished talking, and know why this happened.

In my heart, the fear I had of the foreboding earlier worsened.

Ahem, Lizbet cleared her throat, then said,

"Then... I shall explain everything clearly."

"S-sorry to trouble you."

"This all began because.... Summer vacation is nearing its end."

"Aha?"

In my surprise, I opened my eyes and thought —— Indeed, to a student, it was a most dazzling summer holiday.

Three days more till it ended.

There's no need to mention the problem, no, the tragedy, as everyone would know it.

I completely agree with these words, but what does this have to do with our situation?

"...Ah, it's like this... because the summer vacation is about to end, so we should do our final activity together, so we visit the UW together?"

I tilted my head, speculating in my mind.

"This is a great idea, but couldn't you have just told it to me in the beginning?"

The girls all shook their heads together, then Lizbet opened her mouth and said,

"That is, the problem is not as simple as you think, Asuna and I are in our third year, this could be our last summer holidays!"

Indeed, of everyone here, the eldest would be the 20-year-old Alice, followed by the 18-year-old Asuna and Liz. Sinon and me are 17, Scilica and Lyfa are 16, and the youngest is of course Yui. If I included the years I spent in UW, I would probably be at around Alice's age. But in the real world I was only high school second year student.

Liz pointed at me with her finger, then continued.

"Our third year's summer holidays are about to end, this means... emm... A stage in our life is coming to an end! If we use MMO terms, this means we are in the second round, which means we need to start on the long and difficult training period."

——*University students or members of the community may have the right to talk about this*—— was what I wanted to say, but I could understand what the problem was now.

"Oh, oh... maybe."

Seeing me nod, Liz forcefully stared at me, and said in a calm voice,

"You should understand during next year's summer holidays."

In short, I looked at the calendar, while thinking "After this summer holidays ends are the exams."

Suddenly a thought came to me.

After that Liz blushed for no apparent reason, and looked down. Upon seeing this situation, Sinon used her cold tone, and continued to explain,

"Even though I'm only in my second year, I can understand Liz and Asuna's feelings, after all, I intend to get a job. Even... even considering the real world, we need to start looking at reality. I'm not saying I hate or don't want to grow up, but if it went on like this, another problem will surface."

"P-problem?"

"Yes, it is, what to do with our «Alliance»?"

"Ah? Alliance?"

Hearing this unfamiliar word, once again my thoughts went astray.

Is it an ALO association? But I've never heard of it...

Sneaking a look at me while I was like that, Sinon said,

"Abbreviation —— KKA, the official name is Kirito Kataomoi Alliance."[3]

[3] Kataomoi means unrequited love.

"……"

——In this kind of situation, being able to respond appropriately was a skill I have never practiced, so I could only stand there frozen, but thinking about it, this may be one of the only solutions...

On the other hand, for Sinon to say these things... I should say I'm not surprised that it was Sinon. With this level of willpower, it isn't surprising that she is GGO's strongest sniper.

Sinon's face maintained her grim expression, she spread both hands wide and said,

"Even though it is a little too late, but to be honest, me and Liz, Lyfa, Scilica sneakily created the alliance together, protecting Asuna and you. After all, no one was confident they could fight against Asuna confidently."

At this point in the speech, Asuna who sat on my right, suddenly became 80% shy, and the remaining 20% formed an expression I didn't know, as her head shrank down, and to my left, Alice, behaving like a knight, suppressed her feelings, so that other people could not read her expression as she drank her tea.

The one who opened her mouth after Sinon was Lyfa. In contrast to Sinon, her face was red, and using a muzzled tone she said,

"T-that... I'm satisfied just being by Onii-chan's side. But while we were in ALO, while I was with Liz and Sinon drinking tea, everyone had a pensive look. Even just staying by your side was difficult, and one day will come, where you have to go for further education or get a job. And slowly leave our small circle, then go less often onto ALO. The environment around us would gradually change... and finally... it is possible that even this feeling would disappear... right?"

Suddenly, Lyfa's eyes had tears, and even I felt my chest tighten.

Scilica, next to her, faced downwards as she held Lyfa's hands, and started to say,

"W... we also know that there is no easy way to solve this, but didn't want it to be like "we can't do anything about it" just before ending."

At this time... sometime while we were crying together, Alice said,

"There isn't only one real world."

"Eh....."

I looked at the knight's face once again, a faint smile seemed to emerge on her white cheeks. Her originally drooping eyelashes moved upwards, as her cobalt blue eyes looked at me.

"——To me, the real world or UW, both are reality, and in reality we can't change the flow of time."

"Th-this... this truly is....."

"I directly went to see Asuna, bowed and begged to her, to give them... no, "us" a chance to live in another reality, so that even in the real world, dazzling memories that last a lifetime will remain with us. And, if possible, also give us something that can be solid proof."

Alice's words were too difficult to understand, so I could only listen naturally, and finally faced Asuna, the girl I met the earliest, and the one I had many adventures with, who lifted her head, and used her hazelnut colored eyes to look at me.

".....I'm quite worried, and have thought a lot, but... me and Kirito, Alice, Sinon, Lyfa, Liz, Scilica, as well as Yui, if everyone can be

happy... If this kind of thing really exists, then I would reach out my hands... and give it a try.....”

“Everyone... together.”

In front of me mumbling to myself, Lizbet used the tone she started with to continue,

“Because of this, everyone Dived together into UW using 6 units of STL.”

After she smiled vibrantly,

“All of us can get married to you together because of this world!”

And Yui who was still sitting in my lap, suddenly turned around and said to me,

“Even though I’m a bit reluctant, since the ethics and rules in the real world do not apply to this place, this is not being unfaithful, Papa.”

For a few moments, all I could do was hold my mug as I sat slumped on the chair. I didn’t even think things this deep, and couldn’t tell apart clearly if this was reality or a dream made up by the STL.

But I can’t sit like this forever, so I’d best raise my head, and say,

“That... all in all, can you first start confirming beginning from the simplest facts.....?”

“Please ask,” was what Sinon answered.

“Based on what I know, the marriage system in UW... That, how do i say, shouldn’t it be a one husband one wife system?”

Alice was the one who answered.

“That is correct, but third ranked knights and above are not subject to this restriction, in addition to your, what is it... «Account»? Your authority should be even higher than the emperors.”

“.....I see.”

Nodding, even I discovered I had nowhere to run to.

I clumsily looked at the seven girls sitting at the table one by one, then used my most serious expression and voice, and slowly said,

“.....Memories... eh, that... to tell you the truth, I really don’t have that kind of qualification... but I am very happy for your feelings, even though this matter is too sudden, I still have no idea how to organize my feelings properly, but if it is good memories, that, marriage kind of thing, even needs, then there is not enough time... the problem is that Dive time should be past noon, if everyone wants to rush home at night, then about four or five hours still remain, should I hurry to get my clothes, or should I borrow the establishments?”

As I made this remark, I finally felt my heart’s consciousness.

Marriage in UW, compared to the marriage between players in the ALO system, the weight of representation was completely different. But in another reality, the real marriage, if by doing this, the girls would get dazzling memories that would last their lifetime, then I——

“...First of all, let’s all go to the largest church in Centoria! I’ll take...”

As I said that halfway and was getting up, Asuna pulled at my sleeve.

“.....?”

“That... Kirito, I think there is no need to hurry.”

“Eh, but we only have less than five hours left...”

“That, That is... I forgot to tell you at the beginning... but...”

Asuna continued,

“Right now, UW has an acceleration of 10000 times, so we have the remaining time of fifty thousand hours left, so...”

Yui finally said,

“Two thousand and eighty three days, which is about five years and eight months.”

(END)

Sword Art Online

Side Story Compilations

Story Kawahara Reki

Illustration abec

Translators Black Cats of the Full Moon
- Aria in the Starless Night part 1-10

Thinklife
- Aria in the Starless Night part 11

Tap
- Sound of Water, Sound of Hammer

Pryun
- Aria in the Starless Night part 12 onward
- ME4: Cold hand, Warm heart
- ME8: Rondo of the Transient Sword
- ME9: Monochrome Concerto
- There is but one ultimate way

BeginnerXP
- ME5: Salvia
- ME6: Algade Showdown
- ME7: Contninuation: Aria in the Starless Night
- Versus

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